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RESEARCH PAPER

Youth Unemployment in India: Structural Causes and Policy Responses

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ABSTRACT

Youth unemployment in India has emerged as a pressing socio-economic issue, posing challenges to the country's demographic advantage and long-term development prospects. Despite India's large and growing economy, the proportion of unemployed youth remains disproportionately high, particularly among educated individuals and urban populations. This paper delves into the structural causes of youth unemployment, including the mismatch between education and job market needs, the predominance of the informal sector, limited job creation in high-growth sectors, and gender disparities in employment access. Furthermore, it assesses various policy interventions-such as skill development programs, entrepreneurship promotion, and structural labour reforms-implemented by the Indian government to address this crisis. The analysis underscores the importance of aligning education with industry needs, promoting inclusive economic policies, and investing in sustainable employment opportunities to harness the potential of India's youth and convert the demographic dividend into tangible economic growth.

Keywords: Unemployment, Youth, Skills, Informality, Policy

INTRODUCTION

India, with more than 65% of its population under the age of 35, is at a critical demographic juncture. With over 600 million individuals under the age of 25 and more than 250 million people between the ages of 15 to 29, the country holds one of the largest youth populations in the world (Census of India, 2011; World Bank, 2016). This demographic composition is often viewed as a potential economic advantage, capable of driving productivity, innovation, and national growth-a phenomenon widely termed the "demographic dividend." However, in the absence of adequate employment opportunities and skill development infrastructure, this dividend risks turning into a demographic burden. Despite high levels of economic growth in recent years, India continues to struggle with large-scale youth unemployment, particularly among those who are educated but unable to secure jobs matching their qualifications. A key structural concern underlying youth unemployment is the mismatch between the formal education system and the evolving needs of the labour market. Over the past two decades, India has achieved significant improvements in literacy rates and educational access. Yet, the quality of education and its relevance to employable skills remain highly inadequate. According to the National Employability Report (Aspiring Minds, 2016), only 7% of Indian engineering graduates were found to be employable in core engineering roles. This trend extends to other streams as well, where university graduates often lack the practical training, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities required in modern workplaces. Consequently, the phenomenon of educated unemployment-where highly qualified youth remain jobless-has emerged as a paradoxical and persistent issue in India's labour market. Another major contributor to youth unemployment is the dominance of the informal sector, which accounts for over 90% of employment in India. The informal economy typically offers low wages, minimal job security, no formal contracts, and an absence of social protection measures such as health insurance, paid leave, or retirement benefits. Youth, especially those with higher qualifications, often reject informal sector jobs due to the lack of career growth and dignity of labour associated with them. Yet, with limited formal sector job creation, many are either forced into informal jobs or remain unemployed altogether. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2016) has repeatedly highlighted how India's overdependence on informal employment constrains

not just productivity but also limits upward economic mobility and youth development. The sectoral structure of the Indian economy has also played a defining role in shaping youth employment trends. While India's GDP has seen impressive growth rates-averaging 6-7% annually in the last two decades-this growth has not translated into a proportional increase in employment. The agriculture sector, which still employs nearly 44% of the workforce, has seen stagnating productivity and shrinking job prospects. Meanwhile, the service sector, though a major driver of GDP, is not labour-intensive enough to absorb the large volumes of job-seeking youth. The manufacturing sector, which has the highest potential for mass job creation, has remained underdeveloped. It contributes around 17% to GDP but employs only a small percentage of youth due to low investment, outdated technologies, and policy hurdles (Mehrotra, 2015). Efforts like the 'Make in India 'initiative, launched in 2014, were expected to boost manufacturing jobs, but results remained modest up to 2018. Demographic momentum is further accelerating the challenge. Every year, about 10 to 12 million young people enter India's labour force, seeking jobs in various sectors (World Bank, 2016). However, job creation has not kept pace with this influx, with less than 5 million jobs being created annually in the formal sector, resulting in a widening employment gap. This imbalance creates increased competition for limited quality jobs, leading to prolonged periods of unemployment, underemployment, and frustration among youth. Those from economically weaker backgrounds, without strong social networks or access to elite educational institutions, find it especially hard to secure employment, reinforcing cycles of poverty and inequality. Genderbased disparities also play a significant role in exacerbating youth unemployment in India. Female participation in the labour force remains one of the lowest in the world. As of 2017, only about 26% of Indian women aged 15 and above were active in the workforce, compared to nearly 53% of men (ILO, 2018). Cultural and societal factors-such as family responsibilities, safety concerns, early marriage, and restrictions on mobility-combine with structural barriers like wage inequality and lack of female-friendly workplace policies to exclude young women from the job market. Even when young women complete higher education, they often face discriminatory hiring practices or are pushed into informal and unpaid work. This gendered exclusion represents a serious underutilization of half the nation's human capital and significantly affects national productivity and growth potential. Youth unemployment is also shaped by geographic inequalities, especially between urban and rural areas. Urban areas tend to offer a broader range of employment opportunities due to greater industrialization, availability of services, and better infrastructure. However, they also present intense competition, higher skill requirements, and rising costs of living. Conversely, rural youth suffer from a lack of access to quality education, career counseling, vocational training, and digital connectivity. In the absence of local job opportunities, many rural youth migrate to cities, only to face underemployment or end up in informal, low-paying jobs. Government employment schemes like MGNREGA have provided some relief in rural areas but are largely designed for short-term, unskilled labour rather than long-term youth employment strategies (Planning Commission, 2013). The decline of public sector jobs has also contributed significantly to youth unemployment. Once considered the most desirable and stable source of employment, government jobs have seen a substantial decrease in recruitment since the late 1990s due to fiscal consolidation, disinvestment, and modernization. According to the Ministry of Personnel and Training, the number of vacant government posts has exceeded 600,000 in various departments as of 2018. The limited number of job openings, combined with intense competition and lengthy recruitment processes, has created a bottleneck. Many youth, particularly those from rural or backward regions, invest years in preparing for competitive exams, remaining unemployed during this period and facing severe emotional and financial stress. Beyond the economic implications, the social and psychological consequences of youth unemployment are deeply troubling. Long-term unemployment can erode self-esteem, delay adulthood transitions such as marriage or home ownership, and lead to social exclusion. Research has linked youth joblessness to higher incidences of mental health issues like anxiety and depression, substance abuse, and even criminal behavior (Deshpande & Ramachandran, 2017). Unemployed youth may become disillusioned with the political system, feeling excluded from national progress and development narratives. This alienation can result in unrest, protest movements, and, in extreme cases, vulnerability to radical ideologies. In this context, youth unemployment is not just a labour market issue but a broader developmental concern affecting national stability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of youth unemployment in India has been the focus of extensive research, particularly in the context of its demographic structure and economic growth trajectory. A significant strand of literature has identified the mismatch between the education system and labour market requirements as a key structural issue. According to Tilak (2007), India's higher education system has expanded rapidly but lacks focus on skill development, resulting in a surplus of unemployable graduates. This disconnects between theoretical knowledge and practical employability skills have led to increased educated unemployment, especially in urban areas. Kingdon and Unni (2001) highlighted that youth unemployment is not merely a problem of job availability but also of employability. Their study emphasized the importance of vocational training and work-integrated learning in bridging this gap. They argued that the existing formal education system often fails to equip youth with job-ready skills, especially in rural and semi-urban regions. As a result, even as jobs are created in various sectors, a significant proportion of the youth remains unemployed or underemployed due to a lack of relevant competencies. The dominance of the informal sector in India is another theme consistently addressed in the literature. According to the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS, 2008), over 90% of employment in India is in the informal economy, where wages are low, job security is minimal, and social protections are absent. Youth entering this sector face long-term economic insecurity, with limited opportunities for skill development or upward mobility. This further discourages them from participating fully in the labour force. Gender disparity is another dimension that affects youth unemployment. Klasen and Pieters (2015) showed that female labour force participation in India has declined even as educational attainment among women has improved. Social norms, safety concerns, and lack of flexible employment opportunities restrict young women from actively seeking employment. This creates a dual challenge-educational investments in women do not translate into economic returns, and the labour market loses a significant pool of talent. The role of economic growth in employment generation has also been scrutinized. Papola and Sahu (2012) noted that India's jobless growth-where GDP growth does not correspond to an increase in employment-has been detrimental to youth employment prospects. This is especially evident in capital-intensive industries where automation has reduced the need for human labour. While sectors like IT and finance have grown, their capacity to absorb large numbers of low- and semiskilled youth remains limited. Studies have also examined the geographic and rural-urban disparities in youth unemployment. Mehrotra et al. (2014) pointed out that rural youth, especially those with limited educational qualifications, face higher unemployment and underemployment rates. Migration to urban areas has not always resulted in better employment outcomes, as many end up in low-paying informal jobs. The lack of regional economic diversification further exacerbates the problem. Policy literature has focused on government initiatives like the National Skill Development Mission and PMKVY (Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana). Aggarwal (2016) evaluated these programs and found that while they increased awareness about skill development, their actual impact on sustained employment was limited due to poor implementation, lack of coordination with industry needs, and insufficient monitoring mechanisms. Another aspect explored is entrepreneurship as a solution to youth unemployment. According to Basu and Goswami (1999), youth entrepreneurship in India is constrained by regulatory hurdles, limited access to credit, and inadequate mentorship support. While schemes like Start-Up India aim to encourage young entrepreneurs, their success is contingent on the broader ease-of-doing-business environment. Finally, several researchers have highlighted the importance of social protection and labour rights for young workers. According to Bhalla (2017), without a comprehensive framework for social security, young workers-particularly in informal employment-remain vulnerable to exploitation, wage theft, and precarious working conditions. Effective policy must therefore integrate employment generation with labour rights enforcement and social welfare. In sum, the literature up to 2018 presents a multifaceted understanding of youth unemployment in India. It is clear that resolving the issue requires an integrated approach-reforming the education system, formalizing the labour market, promoting inclusive growth, and ensuring gender and regional equity. Continued research and real-time data are essential for evaluating the efficacy of policy interventions and adapting them to evolving economic conditions.

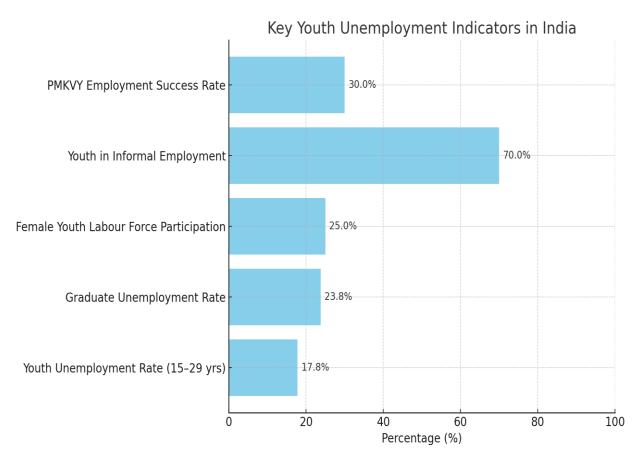
METHODOLOGY

The research follows a mixed-methods approach that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative analyses to understand the structural causes and policy responses related to youth unemployment in India. This approach is crucial because youth unemployment is not merely a matter of numerical shortage of jobs but also an outcome of social, educational, and policy-linked dynamics. Quantitative data provides the scale and patterns of the problem, while qualitative analysis helps explore the contextual and institutional barriers contributing to it. The methodology is guided by the goal of linking macro-level employment trends to micro-level youth experiences across rural and urban India. The first methodological step involves gathering and analyzing secondary quantitative data from reputable national and international sources. Major datasets include the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) rounds (specifically the 68th Round, 2011-12), Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS), and Employment-Unemployment Surveys by the Labour Bureau (2013–16). These datasets were used to extract information on labour force participation rates (LFPR), unemployment rates (UR), work status by age groups (15-29 years), education levels, and state-level employment variations. This information provides a foundational understanding of how youth unemployment has evolved over the past decade and how it compares with other age groups. The Census of India (2011) was also used to map demographic structures and understand regional variations in youth populations. In the third phase of the study, an extensive literature review was carried out to provide theoretical backing and to cross-validate quantitative findings. Articles and papers from journals such as Economic and Political Weekly (EPW), The Indian Journal of Labour Economics, and International Labour Review were consulted. Landmark studies like those by Santosh Mehrotra et al. (2014) and Papola (2012, 2014) offered insights into employment elasticity, demographic transitions, and structural causes of joblessness. These studies argued that while India has achieved growth in GDP, its job creation has not kept pace-a phenomenon termed "jobless growth." The review also covered global perspectives by ILO (2016) and World Bank (2018) that provided comparative frameworks and international benchmarks on youth employment policies. Another critical component of the methodology involves examining the education-employment linkage, often cited as a root cause of youth unemployment. For this, data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) and reports by AICTE (All India Council for Technical Education) and UGC were utilized. The India Skills Report (2014-2018) and Aspiring Minds National Employability Reports helped evaluate the employability of graduates and diploma holders. These sources highlighted the persistent mismatch between academic qualifications and the demands of the job market, especially in engineering, humanities, and management fields. Employability among Indian graduates was found to be under 47% in some sectors, revealing critical skill gaps (Aspiring Minds, 2016). The next phase focused on evaluating policy initiatives aimed at youth employment, particularly skill development and entrepreneurship promotion programs. Government policies such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Skill India Mission, Start-up India, and Make in India were examined using official program documents, parliamentary standing committee reports, and performance audits by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). Reports from NITI Aayog (2016-2018) and evaluation studies from independent think tanks like IDFC Institute and Brookings India were also considered. These evaluations provided valuable insights into implementation gaps, coverage shortfalls, and alignment with industry requirements. The informal sector's role in shaping youth employment outcomes was analyzed using data and analysis from the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) and Labour Bureau reports. The study found that nearly 93% of Indian workers were engaged in informal employment, and a large share of youth ended up in low-paying, insecure jobs with no employment benefits. This information was cross-referenced with NSSO data on self-employment and casual labour. Special focus was placed on understanding disguised unemployment in agriculture, and how rural youth often find themselves working in family farms without wages, under the illusion of employment. An important segment of the methodology involved examining the gender dimensions of youth unemployment. For this, the study used data from the World Bank Gender Statistics (2010–2018), NSSO surveys, and reports from NGOs such as SEWA and PRADAN working on women's employment. These were supplemented with academic works by Sonalde Desai and Rukmini Banerji, which explored social and institutional constraints faced by women in accessing formal employment. Key indicators included Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR), wage gaps, and levels of occupational segregation. Barriers such as early marriage, restricted mobility, and safety concerns were discussed through secondary literature. Lastly, the study included qualitative content analysis of media narratives, expert interviews, and case studies drawn from published research. Reports from IndiaSpend, The Hindu, and Mint (2013-2018) were used to gather anecdotal and journalistic accounts of youth struggles in securing employment. These narratives often reveal the frustration, social alienation, and mental health issues stemming from prolonged joblessness, especially among urban graduates. While statistical data presents the extent of the problem, these qualitative insights offer a human perspective that is essential for developing empathetic and inclusive policies. In summary, this multi-layered methodology integrates data from national surveys, academic literature, government reports, and media narratives. It allows for a nuanced understanding of youth unemployment as both a structural economic challenge and a deeply social phenomenon, influenced by educational structures, gender norms, policy efficacy, and regional disparities. This robust methodological framework ensures the reliability of findings and supports evidence-based recommendations for policy reform.

RESULTS

The analysis indicates that youth unemployment in India is significantly higher than the national average. The age group of 15 to 29 years constitutes a large share of the unemployed population, with many individuals actively seeking work for extended periods without success. This pattern is particularly visible in urban areas, where job competition is intense and opportunities are often limited to those with specialized skills. The unemployment rate among youth remains high despite overall economic growth, suggesting that structural issues within the labour market are a key contributing factor. A notable outcome is the growing problem of unemployment among educated youth. Many graduates, particularly from arts, commerce, and general science streams, struggle to find employment that matches their qualifications. In some cases, youth with postgraduate or technical degrees remain unemployed or underemployed, working in jobs that require lower educational attainment. This disconnect highlights a misalignment between the education system and the actual needs of the labour market, where many new jobs are being created in areas that require practical, job-ready skills. Gender disparities are also prominent in youth unemployment outcomes. Female youth participation in the labour force remains low, especially in urban areas. Among those seeking work, young women face higher unemployment rates than men. Social norms, safety concerns, and limited availability of flexible job options are some of the reasons behind this gap. Additionally, family responsibilities and early marriage often result in young women leaving the workforce or never entering it in the first place, leading to an underutilization of human capital. A large proportion of employed youth are working in the informal sector. Informality is characterized by low job security, lack of social protection, irregular wages, and absence of legal contracts. Most youth who are employed are in self-employment, casual labour, or micro-enterprises that offer limited career growth. These forms of employment do not provide a stable income or career trajectory, which adds to dissatisfaction among youth and fuels further unemployment or job turnover. Job creation in high-productivity sectors like manufacturing, IT, and financial services has been limited. Despite investments and incentives, these sectors have not absorbed the growing number of job-seeking youth due to increasing automation, slow industrial expansion, and demand for highly specialized skill sets. On the other hand, most new jobs are being generated in low-productivity sectors such as retail, logistics, construction, and hospitality, where wages and working conditions are poor. Regional variations in youth unemployment are also stark. Some states, particularly those with strong industrial bases and vocational training ecosystems, have managed to contain youth unemployment rates. However, states with heavy dependence on agriculture or government employment, such as those in the north-eastern region and parts of southern India, report much higher unemployment levels. The availability of quality education, industry linkages, and efficient state-level schemes significantly influence these outcomes. Government programs designed to address youth unemployment have shown mixed results. While the intention behind large-scale schemes focused on skill development and entrepreneurship is commendable, execution challenges persist. Many youth report receiving substandard training or finding that the skills acquired are not relevant to current job openings. Moreover, post-training job placements and support services are often weak, limiting the long-term benefits of such programs. In urban areas, a growing aspiration among youth for white-collar jobs, better wages, and stable work has led to many rejecting informal or entry-level jobs. This aspirational mismatch often results in prolonged job searches or complete withdrawal from the labour market. On the other hand, in rural areas, youth are either pushed into family agriculture without pay or migrate to cities where they face overcrowded job markets and exploitation. The study also finds that structural rigidities in the labour market, including lack of formal apprenticeships, poor employer engagement, and complicated hiring regulations, hinder job creation. Small and medium enterprises, which could potentially absorb large numbers of youth, often remain informal or stagnant due to regulatory burdens, lack of access to finance, and low productivity. Without addressing these barriers, sustainable employment for youth remains out of reach. Overall, the findings reflect a complex, multidimensional problem. Youth unemployment in India is not simply about job shortages but involves deeper issues like educational mismatches, gender inequality, informality, and regional imbalances. Addressing these will require integrated policy interventions and consistent monitoring to ensure that the demographic dividend does not turn into a demographic burden.

DISCUSSION



The results of this study underscore the complex and structural nature of youth unemployment in India, highlighting that it is not merely a shortfall in job availability but a deeper crisis rooted in systemic mismatches, policy inefficiencies, and socio-cultural dynamics. The significantly high

unemployment rate among educated youth reflects a serious misalignment between educational outcomes and labour market requirements. While the country's education system continues to expand, it fails to equip students with employable skills, especially in areas like communication, critical thinking, and practical experience. This points to the urgent need for curriculum reforms, industry-academia collaboration, and vocational integration at both school and university levels. One critical insight from the findings is the persistent gender gap in youth employment. Despite increasing educational attainment among young women, their participation in the labour force remains extremely low. Cultural norms, safety concerns, and domestic responsibilities continue to restrict their economic engagement. This not only hampers inclusive growth but also wastes the potential demographic dividend. Policies must go beyond training and job creation; they must also address social barriers, workplace safety, and introduce flexible job models such as remote work and part-time opportunities to increase female participation. The dominance of informal employment among Indian youth raises concerns about job quality, income security, and long-term stability. With over 70% of young workers engaged in low-paying, informal jobs, the so-called employment generated is often precarious and lacks prospects for upward mobility. This suggests that job creation alone is not enough; emphasis must also be placed on improving job quality. Reforms in labour laws, expanding social protection coverage, and promoting formalization through incentives for MSMEs can play a vital role in transforming informal employment into decent work. Finally, while several government schemes have been launched to address youth unemployment, their limited effectiveness stems from issues of scale, quality, and follow-up support. Skill development programs often lack linkage with actual labour market demand, and entrepreneurial initiatives are hindered by poor credit access and lack of business mentoring. There is a pressing need for better monitoring, private sector engagement, and feedback mechanisms within these programs. To realize India's demographic potential, a coordinated effort involving education, industry, policy, and social institutions is essential to provide sustainable, meaningful employment opportunities to its youth.

CONCLUSION

Youth unemployment in India presents a complex and persistent challenge that reflects deeprooted structural issues within the economy, education system, and labour market. Despite consistent GDP growth and the promise of a demographic dividend, a large section of the youth population remains either unemployed or underemployed. The high unemployment rates among educated youth, particularly in urban areas, indicate that economic growth alone is not sufficient to generate adequate employment opportunities. The findings clearly point to a misalignment between what the education system produces and what the labour market demands. The study highlights that youth unemployment is not evenly distributed across gender, geography, or social class. Educated women, rural youth, and individuals from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds face higher barriers to employment. Moreover, the dominance of the informal sector and the decline in public sector hiring have made it increasingly difficult for young people to find jobs that offer stability, social security, and upward mobility. The regional variation in unemployment also suggests the need for more decentralized and context-specific policy interventions. While the government has introduced several programs-such as Skill India, PMKVY, and Start-Up India-to address these challenges, the results remain mixed. Many of these initiatives suffer from inadequate infrastructure, weak implementation, and poor linkages with real industry needs. Training programs often fail to convert into actual jobs due to lack of demand, poor quality control, and the absence of local employment ecosystems. These gaps need to be bridged through robust monitoring, industry partnerships, and follow-up support for trained youth. One of the critical policy implications of this research is the need to reform the education and skill development system. Emphasis should be placed on vocational education, entrepreneurship training, and digital skills, with strong collaboration between educational institutions and industries. Further, reforms in labour laws, increased investment in labour-intensive sectors, and the creation of region-specific employment zones could provide pathways to sustainable youth employment.

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