



## Education and Employment: A View from the Periphery

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I recently spent some time in a village in Gujarat almost exclusively inhabited by an Adivasi community called the Rathva. In my discussions with the community, 'dhandho' (a Gujarati word that roughly translates as occupation) was cited as the key reason why they wanted their children to attend school. 'Dhandho' is a word that can mean jobs (public or private) or self-employment in petty businesses. When I dug deeper, it became evident that the preference is for jobs, particularly government jobs, typically for jobs as teachers, nurses, police constables or army jawans. These are entry level jobs in the government (Group C or Group D jobs as per the administrative classification) that are relatively abundant.

The view that education equips children to take up jobs in the industry is supported by Education Policy documents. In the ongoing consultation for the new education policy, a draft document<sup>1</sup> of MHRD website claims, 'The task of enhancing the employability of the products of the education system ought to be accorded high priority'. It also has academic backing. Human Capital Theory proposes that at an individual level, education is an investment in oneself, which can provide higher returns in the form of increased earnings in the future. At the national level, a higher investment in education is expected to bring in higher GDP growth in the future. Thus the education job linkage is quite strongly established in popular imagination. But ground realities told me quite a different story.

Bhilpur (name changed) is a village located in Chhota Udepur district of Gujarat with a population of 3000. The key economic activity in the village is subsistence agriculture complemented with migratory labour in various construction sites in the major cities of western India such as Jaipur, Vapi etc. Some families are also engaged in migratory sharecropping in the cotton fields in and around Rajkot in Gujarat. Spatially the village is organised into *falias*, a homestead of extended kin spread over a common ancestral land. The landholding is marginal with each family owning

on average about 1-2 acres, with the holdings reducing every generation with land getting split among the male heirs. Land is primarily cultivated for self-consumption and is only a minor source of cash income. The migratory labour to construction sites is the main source of income to fulfil all other needs and most of the youth (aged 15 to 40) are away at least a few months each year to such sites. Most families, however, aspire to a job, particularly a government job, for their children. This is seen to be a way out of poverty and an insurance against the uncertainties of a life dependent on subsistence agriculture. Despite this, less than five per cent of the families have members engaging in the salaried jobs, whether in public or private sectors and, as is going to be discussed shortly, chances of them getting salaried jobs are slim.

There are four schools in this village: a Lower Primary School (grades 1-5); a Higher Primary School (grades 1-8); a residential Ashram School (grades 1-8); a newly opened Model School (grades 6-12). Many of the students who pursue secondary schooling also commute to secondary schools in Chhota Udepur. Last year, about 50% of the children who enrolled in secondary education in the Chhota Udepur taluk (block), were able to pass the SSC exams and those of who made it to the higher secondary only about 33% were able to pass the HSC exams. So, even for the students who made it to the secondary school, only about 17% were able to complete it. Considering that many children do not even make it to the secondary education, the rate of completion of secondary education in this region is likely to be in single digit in percentage terms and those pursuing higher education even smaller. This means that with SSC and HSC being the minimum qualification for many public and private sector jobs, a majority of the young people here are already precluded from the job market.

When one looks at the availability of jobs, the picture is similarly bleak. There are not many industries or other wage earning jobs in the vicinity that can be pursued. Of the few jobs that are available

<sup>1</sup>Some Inputs for Draft National Education Policy, 2016

locally, for example dolomite stone crushing or sand quarrying, most are not dependable and pay poorly. The opportunities for coveted government jobs are seriously limited despite the members of the community being eligible for reservations in these jobs through affirmative action under the Scheduled Tribes category. As a result they resort to informal sector jobs as and when they are available, often under adverse conditions. The most feasible option for jobs is to migrate to cities for manual construction labour since formal sector jobs, whether in the government or private sector, are simply too few to accommodate most aspirants. The scope for skill based self-employment within the village is under - explored, but that too is unlikely to be a major source of livelihood. After all, this village can accommodate just a handful of electricians and plumbers, whereas the youth seeking employment are far more. Setting up a petty business requires capital that may be out of reach for most of the families who are in a day to day survival mode. In the meantime, educated youth are moving away from subsistence agriculture that has traditionally shielded the families against the uncertainties of the labour markets.

A common response to this situation is to blame the youth or their families for not taking education seriously. Or else, to accuse the education system of not doing a good job, for not delivering 'quality' education. The situation is often presented as a skill mismatch between what youth possess and what the industry wants. There is an element of truth in these claims. But this is less than half of the story.

Even the young men and women who have competed higher education are unable to find employment and if they do, it is likely in the informal sector. As per some estimates more than 90% of the jobs in India are in the informal sector. The rhetoric of job creation that successive governments have resorted to has not borne fruit on the ground. In fact, we are staring at a spectre of jobless growth<sup>2</sup> where mechanisation more than offsets the need for more people in industry. Profit- seeking capitalist enterprises are indifferent

to employment generation, and if they had a choice they would make do with a minimum amount of employment if it helped maximise profits and ease operations. Klees (2014)<sup>3</sup> makes powerful argument when he states, 'unemployment is not a worker supply problem, but a structural problem of capitalism. There are two or more billion un- or under-employed people on this planet, not because they don't have the right skills, but because full employment is neither a feature nor a goal of capitalism'. This condition is particularly acute in case of postcolonial countries such as India as the demographic and economic landscape is very different from the developed west.

In the meantime, exodus from traditional modes of livelihoods and subsistence is an empirical reality. My conversations with community leaders and local administration corroborated this analysis. While in casual conversations, they reiterate the common sense belief that education is good for jobs, whenever I had a more serious discussion they accepted that jobs are hard, almost impossible, to come by and education is not helping in the process. A community member referred to the educated unemployed as people possessing a half-baked education (Gujarati: *adhkachru bhanela*) who refuse to work in farms or engage in manual labour and are easy target for activities such as bootlegging or working as henchmen for local politicians.

If this is the case, it calls for a serious reassessment of the education – employment linkage. To be clear, this is not a call to abandon attempt at creating jobs or developing skills, but a request to reflect on the limitations of an exclusive reliance and a blind faith in this approach. So far the entire debate on frittering away the 'demographic dividend' has focused on jobs in the capitalist economy. This is also not a rehash of the old relevance debate where one educated a child for her 'station in life' and in the process denied her the opportunities that the 'modern' world can offer. It is merely a suggestion to explore other possibilities that education can offer in securing economic wellbeing

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<sup>2</sup>See for example a recent article in the Hindustan Times on March 15, 2017. 'India must be careful: Jobless growth can lead to social unrest'.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted from 'Education, Economy and Society' by Salim Vally and Enver Motala.

of the mass of youth. It is a call for preserving what has worked so far, and abandon it only when viable alternatives are available. To focus on livelihoods as well as jobs. This is not a new debate. Gandhi had anticipated this when he proposed his *Nai Talim* that dovetailed with his vision of *Gram Swaraj*. The ashram shala that was established in this village in the 1950s embodied this Gandhian vision, but has now succumbed to the current discourse of skills and jobs.

In the present time, scholars such as Bonaventura de Sousa Santos also point to looking at alternatives

that look beyond the capitalist modes of production and propose a search for cooperative modes of production or solidary economy, alternative development and alternatives to development. For our education policy to be able to respond to this suggestion, one must first acknowledge the ground realities as they stand, and then seriously try to understand the nuances of how they manifest in real terms. Bhilpur is just one village: other villages may have different dynamics at play, while the urban poor may have yet another. But we will only be able to respond if we are willing to acknowledge and understand their predicament.