

BRING THE SHINE BACK ON GOVERNMENT JOBS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

Police personnel deployed at Hubballi railway station after security was beefed up following protests against the Agnipath scheme. | Photo Credit: PTI

In 2019, an Indian citizen died of suicide every hour due to joblessness, poverty or bankruptcy, according to the National Crime Records Bureau. About 25,000 Indians died of suicide between 2018 and 2020, said the Union government in the Rajya Sabha in February this year. Several unemployed people in India resort to protests — thousands burnt railway coaches in January 2022 over alleged flaws in the railways recruitment process and more recently, India saw protests over the Agnipath scheme.

For those employed in government, the situation is not much better. In May 2022, Haryana terminated the services of over 2,000 contractual health workers (nurses, sweepers, security guards, paramedical staff) who had been hired during the pandemic. In Delhi, hundreds of nurses, paramedical staff, lab technicians and other contractual workers have been terminated by Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital, Lady Hardinge Medical College and others. After banging utensils to thank them, we have fired them.

Additionally, over 8,300 panchayat and rural development contractual staff in Assam staged protests in February 2022. They said they had been in a contractual state for 12-14 years and had not been given bonuses, allowances, pension or pay revisions. In April 2022, some 200 contractual workers of Chhattisgarh's state electricity department were canned-charged and arrested. Being a public servant has rarely mattered less.

The problem is two-fold. First, vacancies in the government are not being filled at a sufficient pace. There were over 60 lakh vacancies in the government across all levels in July 2021. Of these, over 9.1 lakh were in the Central government, while about 2 lakh vacancies were in PSU banks. Additionally, there were over 5.3 lakh vacancies in the State police, while primary schools were estimated to have some 8.3 lakh vacancies. The government has sought to push for recruitment of 10 lakh people in a mission-mode over 1.5 years. However, this would fall short of the size of the problem. We need greater ambition on this front.

Second, where vacancies are being filled, they are notably skewed towards contractual jobs. In 2014, about 43% of government employees (about 12.3 million) had non-permanent or contractual jobs, with about 6.9 million working in key flagship welfare schemes (Anganwadi workers, for instance) with low wages (in some cases, lower than the minimum wage) and little, if any, social security cover, as per the Indian Staffing Industry Research 2014 report. By 2018, the share of government employees in this category had risen to 59%. For Central Public Sector Enterprises, the share of contractual (and non-permanent) employees increased from 19% to 37% (reaching 4,98,807 in March 2020), with permanent employees dropping in share by 25%. Consider select PSUs. ONGC had contractual employees form over 81% of its staff in March 2020. Some States have sought to take this further — in 2020, while the pandemic led to mass unemployment, the State government in Uttar Pradesh sought to amend recruitment for Group B and C employees (of which there were about 9 lakh in 2020 in U.P.), with a push for increasing contractual employment (for a five-year period), with such employees not offered allowances and typical benefits. Post the five-year period, a pathway to regularisation was offered, only if the workers could pass a rigorous performance appraisal; if they did not pass, they would be dismissed. Any dependent of a deceased employee, if appointed to such posts, would also have

to go through similar appraisals. In 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that a contractual employee for a government department was not a government servant. If most government employees have contractual terms, will a public ethos continue to exist?

Instead of expanding contractual employment, we should seek to bolster public services. For the past few decades, we have been under-investing in public goods — as witnessed by the COVID-19 crisis, our healthcare system simply does not have the capacity to provide adequate healthcare support to citizens under normal conditions, let alone a pandemic. Expanding public service provisioning will also lead to the creation of good quality jobs, along with skilled labour, offering us social stability. A push for enhancing public health would lead to the creation of societal assets; having more ICU beds in the first place would have ensured that the COVID-19 crisis could have been managed better. A push for a universal basic services programme with public healthcare would also help supplement insurance-based models like Ayushman Bharat. Such spending, however, will eventually lead to an increase in consumer demand and have strong multiplier effects, while generally improving the productivity and quality of life in India's cities and villages.

Consider renewable power generation. There is significant potential for job creation (for example, in rooftop solar power generation, manufacturing of solar panel modules and end-use servicing). Meanwhile, on the waste management front, there is significant scope for expanding waste-water treatment capacity, with the building and management of treatment plants for sewer waste and faecal sludge treatment plants leading to generation of jobs. Encouraging solid waste treatment practices (such as dry waste collection, micro-composting) could create about 300 jobs per year in a city municipal corporation. A push for adopting electric vehicles and encouraging green mobility would require significant manpower, leading to the generation of 'green jobs'. In addition, we must continue to encourage urban farming, with significant job potential in permaculture, gardening and nursery management. Perhaps another avenue of selective PSU reform could also be considered — a PSU with greater autonomy, with the government retaining control via a holding firm, can also be subject to the right incentives. Surely, Indian PSUs could aspire to be as large and efficient as the Chinese ones.

Government jobs have lost their shine. We need to attract talent to the government. Rather than downsizing or simply avoiding the cost of pensions and benefits, one should right-size government. Our public services require more doctors, teachers, engineers, and fewer data entry clerks. Reforms advocated by the Administrative Reforms Commission should be our initial step. This is the time to build capacity for an efficient civil service that can meet today's challenges – providing a corruption-free welfare system, running a modern economy and providing increasingly better public goods. Improved public service delivery, through better compensation, should be our ethos. 'Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan' used to be a driving motto for the government of the day. Instead, treating them as dispensable seems to be the norm.

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