

JOB GROWTH SHOULD ADDRESS INDIA'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONCERNS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues relating to Employment

Resolving the jobs question is central to India's future prosperity and stability. For an economy as large and diverse as India, a successful resolution of the employment challenge is impossible without confronting deeper socio-economic questions. Technocratic, political and philosophical approaches have to be complements, not substitutes in this process. Unfortunately, the opposite holds true in reality.

Big-ticket manufacturing is seen as the panacea for reducing unemployment. But this sector is also witnessing increasing contract-based work, which is adding to the squeeze on workers' earnings and quality of jobs. We rightfully celebrate the rise in educational enrolment in the country. But lack of comprehensive knowledge about the quality of education which has accompanied this rise in enrolment, also makes us circumspect about the future gains from this achievement. Faster environmental clearances are seen to be business, and hence, employment friendly. These short term gains might come at the cost of long-term sustainability. Agitations demanding reservations have proliferated across the country. Posturing about such agitations is driven more by sectarian interests than principles. Political parties repeatedly commit themselves to safeguarding reservations in government, yet any discussion on private sector reservations continues to be a taboo in the mainstream political discourse.

The solution to these multiple and often conflicting constraints vis-à-vis the employment challenge is not to become cynical or brazen. What India needs is an honest long-term policy framework which tries to do justice to all these concerns.

As is obvious, we need to first start asking the right questions before trying to find answers to them. To say that the present discourse on employment falls short is an understatement.

Azim Premji University's initiative of launching an annual State of Working India report is a laudable effort to fill this void. The inaugural report, which was launched last week, gives a lucid yet informed summary of the Indian labour market. Chapter titles (who is looking for work, where is the work, how good is the work and who does the work) are a testimony to the quality of discussion. And not all of it is descriptive stats. The report has a central message: Gandhi and Ambedkar must meet Kuznets and Lewis (the last two are celebrated development economists) to solve India's employment challenge. Gandhi stands for environmental sustainability, Ambedkar for social justice, Kuznets for the labour force shifting from farm to non-farm jobs and Lewis for a shift from less productive to more productive sectors.

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