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No job is 'low' - be it desk or labour

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Shramev Jayate. Maybe in heaven. Here in India, 'shrama' usually comes last. Friends who are employers complain about the difficulty of finding people for service sector jobs that require running around or cleaning up after others. Everyone apparently wants a proper desk-job, not just one that allows you to be seated — not, for example, call centre jobs, which require talking to people and being yelled at — just pushing paper in the calm of your desk. And they are willing to take a large pay cut to do so; a large fraction of those who, tempted by the money or driven by the frustration of being unemployed, take up a more physically demanding profession quit within three months. As a result, even though we are about to cross China as the country with the world's largest employable population, most employers I know are desperate to hire people who are willing to do the (hard and unpleasant) work that most jobs in the developing world entail.

But why put the spot on those low-end jobs? Our entire system is stacked against hard physical labour: Our best mechanical engineers prefer working in the financial sector to working on the shop floor (though the obscene salaries that finance pays is of course a part of the problem). Five times as many people graduate from college than from the Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), meant to supply the country with thinking people who can and want to work with their hands, despite the fact that many more people are qualified to apply to the ITIs than to colleges. In fact more than twice as many people graduate in the Arts than from the ITIs, which probably reflects less a love for literature and history than a disdain for "dirty" work.

It is commonplace to blame the caste system and the British for everything that is wrong with India, and I will, alas, do the same. Thousands of years of discrimination against those who work with their hands (unless the work involves visiting mayhem on other people) is not easy to undo in a few generations. After the rules and even the violence are gone, what remains is the culture, the aspirations that we all share (why did I become a professor after all?).

Especially since the education system continually reinforces those aspirations. The British set up our education system to recruit a small number of clerks and petty officials to serve the colonial state. They were chosen based on a combination of excellent test-taking skills and the ability to speak English when asked and otherwise keep their mouths shut. That is still what our education system aims to deliver, or at least did when I went to school (admittedly a long time ago, but schools, except at the very cutting edge, don't seem to have changed a lot). In my school, as part of our public humiliation for not being good enough or well-behaved enough, we would be told that our future was to end up at the ITI, 500 metres down the road. No wonder no one wants to go there.

It is possible that Modi sees his life as evidence that hard physical work can triumph over every disadvantage, but if so, most of us Indians do not share his faith.

We prefer to take competitive exams or sit through one course after the other in the hope of somehow landing a desk job, or at least postponing the day when we have to resign ourselves to the fact that we will not get one.

The problem is that this undermines Modi's drive to turn India into a manufacturing hub. If people don't want blue-collar work, our labour costs will remain high and our competitiveness low.

What can be done about it? Well, first we can try to shift preferences. We need everybody who the young people admire, and not just Modi, to speak out (in fact Modi's important declaration was perhaps a little compromised by being the prelude to a set of announcements that were seen as anti-labour). If there can be films about why hockey (and not just cricket) is cool, there can be a film or two about the virtues of honest, hard work.

Second, the clear dominance of academic over non-academic skills in our education system needs to go. My sense of my own superiority over many of my classmates would have been much more muted if I knew that they had seen me failing miserably at woodwork or cross-stitch. Unless of course the teachers undermined the whole thing by declaring that these things are all a waste of time, which is what they did when mandatory vocational education was introduced in our high-school curriculum.

Third, we have to make our streets and workplace safe for women and ensure that the house work gets shared more equitably, so that we can benefit from all that underused talent. The garment factories in Bangladesh are staffed mainly by women — why can't it happen here?



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Finally, perhaps the most difficult step: We have to stop under-working and over-paying our government servants. A few years ago Rinku Murgai and Lant Pritchett from the World Bank calculated that the average civil service government school teacher (ie not a contract teacher) makes seven times more than the average private school teacher. It is true that government school teachers are more experienced —but even experienced-adjusted, the difference is 2.5 times, before adding in the vast differences in pensions and other benefits (mostly absent in the private sector). Moreover, despite the greater experience, there is absolutely no evidence that they teach better and some evidence to the contrary. This probably reflects the fact that they have absolute job security and therefore limited compulsion to perform or even show up (their greater experience should be viewed in the light of this fact — such people in the private sector would not have a job).

If one puts all these advantages of public sectors jobs together — much higher salary, benefits and job security and essentially no compulsion to work — it is easy to see why our young people prefer to spend their youth gambling on the possibility of getting one of these marvellous jobs rather than getting down to work. If a course or an exam promises even a one in hundred chance of making it, why not give it a shot? The unwanted jobs will be there, when finally, disheartened and dispirited, they resign themselves to their fate. In the meanwhile, the nation's productivity can wait.

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The views expressed by the author are personal.

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