

Broken Promises to India's Youth*

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Two years ago, when Narendra Modi led the BJP to a huge victory in the general elections, there was little doubt that the youth of India, and especially those in the Hindi heartland, had played a significant role in this victory. In his election speeches, Mr Modi particularly addressed the aspirational young, promising them jobs and “development” rather than “welfare” and offering the hope of a new galvanising energy in place of the tired and apparently directionless government that the UPA regime in its final stages seemed to have become.

In many parts of the country, young voters – many of them first time voters – responded with enthusiasm to this promise. They were also persuaded by the media blitz that suggested that as Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat Mr Modi had supposedly succeeded in delivering rapid growth with lots of employment and an efficient administration. Of course, those rosy pictures of Gujarat were clearly false, as became all too evident quite soon afterwards. This was not because the media turned more honest about conditions in Gujarat (which, in the main, they have not) but because agitations by young Patidars for reservation in government jobs called that bluff, and exposed just how little productive employment generation had taken place in Gujarat during the decade and more of Mr Modi's rule there.

Now that the Modi regime has been in power at the national level for two years, there are many other reasons for the youth of the country to feel duped and even betrayed. Quite contrary to its original promise, this is a government that has shown itself to be remarkably anti-youth, perhaps more so than any government in independent India. This is already evident in its many sins of omission and commission, all of which reveal a deeply cynical attitude to the aspirations of the young and a fundamental antagonism to the ideals that most of them still would like to uphold.

Consider first of all the most critical issues of productive employment generation and quality of work for the young. India is at the early phase of a demographic bulge that was earlier supposed to yield a “demographic dividend” – but such a positive effect presupposes that there will be adequate employment generation to meet the needs of the growing work force. It is estimated that every month 1 million more young people join the ranks of the growing labour force, and within those, more have been through secondary or tertiary education and are looking for jobs of some minimum quality and remuneration.

Unfortunately, this inability to create enough decent jobs was a major failure of the growth process during the boom – and it has remained a major failing even as the economy decelerated. But more to the point, the Modi government has done absolutely nothing to halt this trend and may even have accentuated it through some of its policies. Its approach to job creation appears to be that the private sector (especially large organised firms) will step in to create activity and employment because the government will provide it more incentives. Yet media-savvy talk and various other official blandishments have done very little for this – private investment remains low and employment in the organised sector continues to stagnate. Private

employment in the organised sector has growth slightly, but that is dominantly in contract jobs or with informal and insecure work contracts.

Young women have a particularly hard time of it in the labour market, with rates of open unemployment in urban India around 25 per cent. In both urban and rural areas, even public employment is offered to them on worse terms, as they are the ones hired to work as anganwadi workers and helpers, or ASHAs, at a fraction of the prevailing minimum wages. Even more educated young women face huge difficulties in finding employment, and in the past two years this has been made worse by the open and unrepentant patriarchy that has been unleashed on them with the explicit or implicit consent of members of the ruling party among others.

The absence of jobs is being made even more painful because more new entrants in the job market have been through some sort of tertiary education, and two-thirds of those have been in private educational institutions. Increasingly, education has become more expensive even in public institutions, but the private ones are mostly much more expensive, and so young people and their families are likely to have sold assets or gone into debt to get their degrees. When they emerge from this expensive process and find that they simply cannot find jobs, the scale of their frustration is easy to imagine. If anything, the scenario has actually worsened in the past two years. No wonder, then, that Patidars, Jats and various other caste groups are demanding reservation in government jobs – because these remain not just the most secure, but often the only, organised sector jobs available. Yet job creation no longer seems to be a major policy priority of the government, and Mr Modi's speeches no longer emphasise how much he is going to do on this front.

But the sins of omission, though large in themselves, have also been accompanied by sins of commission so major that they have dominated perceptions. The attack on university students has been so frontal and even vicious that it has captured the public imagination, not always to the benefit of the ruling party. Obviously, the attack on JNU and the Central University of Hyderabad stand out in this respect, but they are not alone and in some ways the threatening messages that these have sent out are even more widespread. By the Ministry of Human Resource Development's own official reckoning, these two are the best universities in the country, yet the Minister herself and other Ministers in the Cabinet seem to be out to destroy them or at the very least hobble their autonomy and independent academic functioning. And the way that students in these and other institutions of learning are being vilified, hounded and persecuted suggests an almost malevolent hatred on the part of those in power.

Strangely, the regime does not appear to recognise that these public institutions remain the aspirational choices of a large part of the youth of the country, particularly those who are not from more well-off sections. And the impressive crop of student leaders emerging from these and other institutions across the country provide new sources of hope and inspiration. Attacking them in this unbalanced and aggressive fashion may well cause reputational damage to the Modi regime that it is as yet unaware of, among the very constituency that it earlier sought to court and that it can ill afford to ignore.

But there is probably another deeper cause for disenchantment among many young people who voted for NDA candidates in the last general elections. This is the

preoccupation with apparently irrelevant and typically divisive issues that has become the main achievement of this government. Whatever the various elements of the Sangh Parivar may think, and however much its Stormtroopers may aggressively push a divisive social and cultural agenda, this is not actually what the youth of the country wants. Communal and religious polarisation may work to a limited extent and for a certain period of time even among the young and especially among more extreme elements. But they cannot substitute or even distract from the failure to ensure any real improvement in their material conditions for too long.

Ultimately the mass of young people in the country are both wiser and more sophisticated in their understanding of political social and economic reality than the Modi regime seems to give them credit for. So the combination of failed promises to and unjustified attacks on youth may welcome back to haunt this government.

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