

Working Paper  
No: **159**

UNEMPLOYMENT  
IN AN ERA OF JOBLESS GROWTH

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**January 2014**

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# UNEMPLOYMENT IN AN ERA OF JOBLESS GROWTH

*N. Chandra Mohan\**

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*[Abstract: This paper focuses on the nature and characteristics of unemployment using the five-yearly surveys of the NSSO. The dominant narrative in the literature has been that the rate of unemployment, whichever way it is measured, has been low and stable in India, unlike internationally. Although it appears that not much has changed, this paper examines some changes that deserve attention: Differentials between various measures of unemployment have also become smaller, pointing to a decline in underemployment. Male-female and rural-urban rates of unemployment have narrowed. The proximate factors behind these narrowing differentials are complex and inter-related, from both the demand and supply side. Female workforce participation rates are declining in rural India but are stable in urban India. Does this reflect a U shape in female participation? There is a shift away from agriculture but this is largely to non-agricultural activities in rural India. Casualisation and marginalisation of the rural and urban workforce has increased, contributing to narrower rural-urban unemployment rates. A large proportion of those who were unemployed, in fact, had marginal work in their last employment. They also faced a longer duration of unemployment.]*

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## 1. Introduction

Unemployment is commonly viewed as a serious problem in India. Yet according to the five-yearly surveys of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) unemployment rates are generally very low. The Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status (UPSS) rates have remained at around 2 per cent at an all-India level from 1972-73 to 2011-12. Contrary to the widespread impression that there is a growing reserve army of unemployed, those who were chronically unemployed averaged 9.5 million persons for two decades since the late 1980s before edging up to 10.8 million to 2011-12.

These low UPSS rates of unemployment in question capture those who did not work but sought or were available for it over the reference period of a year. This measure nets out

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*Acknowledgements:* This paper is an outcome of several conversations and helpful comments from Professor T.S. Papola. His role is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks are also due to Rakesh Kumar Gupta, Sandip Pokhriyal and, above all, B. Dhanunjai Kumar in helping with the paper.

those who may have been working in a subsidiary capacity for 30 days or more and therefore is a measure of chronic unemployment in the Indian economy. One reason why this rate is indeed low is that the poor, especially in rural India, cannot afford to be unemployed for long stretches of time.

Poverty and unemployment are of course not independent of one another but are better treated separately. India remains very much an agrarian economy as the share of workers living off the land remains substantial at 49 per cent in 2011-12 although its share in GDP has declined to 14 per cent. A characteristic feature is the preponderance of self-employment and unpaid family labour on family farms. A fast-rising proportion, however, are the landless who seek employment on the farm and off-farm in rural areas during the lean agricultural season. To be sure, rural poverty is acute but there is “little likelihood of much chronic open unemployment throughout the year”.<sup>1</sup>

Unemployment hardly figures much in official discussions because the economy continues to generate employment opportunities, a situation that contrasts with the advanced countries that still haven't recovered from the global meltdown in 2008-09. The latest joblessness rate in India is 3.7 per cent on a weekly status basis for 2011-12—and not as high as 9.9 per cent as made out by the Economist magazine—while unemployment rates are higher in the US (7.0%) and the European Union (12.1%). Greece and Spain are experiencing rates as high as 27.4 per cent and 26.7 per cent respectively. In South Africa, unemployment is also high at 24.7 per cent.

While joblessness is rising worldwide, with rates edging up to 28 per cent in Greece and Spain by the end of 2014 according to the OECD, the scenario on the face of it does not appear too bleak in India. The projected rate of unemployment on a weekly status basis remains virtually unchanged at 3.6 per cent in 2013-14 although overall GDP growth prospects are only marginally better than 5 per cent registered last fiscal. This projection uses the Twelfth Plan (2012-17) projections of labour force growth of 1 per cent per annum and employment elasticity of 0.2 or the rate of change of employment per unit change in GDP growth.

This is due in some measure to India's labour market generating some employment at the rate of 0.7 per cent per annum between 2004-05 and 2011-12 on a weekly status basis. Nobody is arguing that this is adequate as GDP growth averaged 8.4 per cent per annum over this period. This is perhaps why weekly rates of unemployment have fallen from 4.4 per cent to 3.7 per cent over this period. Thus “most of the countries, developed and developing, have registered increases in their unemployment rates while we were able to create additional jobs” stated PM Manmohan Singh in his address to the Indian Labour Conference in 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Report of the Committee of Experts on Unemployment Estimates, Planning Commission, Government of India, 1970.

However, the quality of these additional jobs leaves much to be desired. There are fewer opportunities for gainful employment for those who leave the countryside to the towns and big cities for work. Organised sector employment -- where work conditions are protected by labour legislation and trade unionism -- is sluggish, if not contracting. The options before jobseekers largely are low-paying jobs in the unorganised or informal sector that includes self-employment and casual odd jobbing. The sort of additional jobs referred to by the Prime Minister were rapidly proliferating in construction, which are predominantly in the unorganised sector.<sup>2</sup>

As if all of this weren't dismal enough, the Twelfth Plan (2012-17) document observes a trend of growing informality even within the organised sector. Informal employment in the organised sector has increased from 46.6 per cent in 2004-05 to 57.8 per cent in 2009-10.<sup>3</sup> This is indicative of what it terms "a movement from the informal agricultural sector to the informal non-agricultural sectors" – a clear pointer to the poor quality of employment on offer for job seekers in the towns and cities. Organised sector employers, for their part, are increasingly hiring workers on contractual terms due to labour laws and other concerns, according to the Twelfth Plan document.

This paper seeks to focus on the nature and characteristics of unemployment in India, using the surveys of the NSSO conducted in 1972-73, 1977-78, 1983, 1987-88, 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2004-05, 2009-10 and 2011-12. 1972-73, 1987-88 and 2009-10 were drought years. The rationale for having another "thick" round two years after 2009-10 was that the economy was also affected by the global economic crisis in 2008-09. The low but stable rates of joblessness since the 1970s persist to this day. Amidst the overall stability, there are changes of late that warrant closer study like narrower male-female and rural-urban rates of unemployment.

## 2. Low but Stable

The NSSO measures unemployment on a yearly, weekly and daily basis. As noted earlier, the puzzle is that the rate of unemployment, whichever way it is captured, is low but relatively stable. The UPSS rate thus has remained around 2 per cent, edging up to 2.2 per cent in 2011-12. On a current weekly basis, too, they have been strikingly stable at around 4 per cent, a pattern that also held during the 1960s according to the writings of the late economist Pravin Visaria. Those on a daily status basis, which

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<sup>2</sup> See Jayan Jose Thomas "India's labour market during the 2000s: Surveying the Changes", Economic and Political Weekly, December 22, 2013. TS Papola and Partha Pratim Sahu, "Growth and Structure of Employment: Long-Term and Post-Reform Performance and the Emerging Challenge", Institute for Studies in Industrial Development Occasional Paper Series 2012/01, pp 68.

<sup>3</sup> Draft Twelfth Five-Year Plan 2012-17, Vol. 3, Social Sector, Planning Commission, Government of India.



captures the average volume of daily unemployment in a day, have remained range-bound between 6 to 8 per cent before declining somewhat in 2011-12.

Perhaps much of the stable but low rates of unemployment (including for the youth) have to do with what the late British historian Eric Hobsbawm termed as the "solid peasant block of India". India remains an agrarian economy, insulated from what he argued was the most far-reaching social change worldwide during the second half of the 20th century -- the death of the peasantry. In 2011-12, self-employment in family-run farms absorbed over half of rural males, while over one-third are casual wage labourers. The preponderance of self-employed in rural India reduces the number of unemployed who seek or are available for employment over a long period.

The stability in rates is also because "the Indian economy has maintained a long-term average growth of about 2 per cent in employment. For a long time, however, it has fallen short of labour force growth which hovered around 2.5 per cent during the 1970s and 1980s, declined to about two per cent during the 1990s, and after continuing to be around 1.9 per cent during the decade of the 2000s, is expected to decline to 1.7 per cent during 2011-17. With an employment growth more or less similar to labour force growth on an average, the rate of unemployment has not significantly changed over the years" argue Papola and Sahu.

Despite the overall stability in rates, certain characteristics of the unemployed are noteworthy. Take the chronically unemployed, for instance. According to the Sixth Plan (1980-85) document, which analysed the findings of NSSO's first two quinquennial rounds in 1972-73 and 1977-78, an important characteristic of the chronically unemployed is the concentration among the youth. By age-group, three-quarters of the usual status unemployment was concentrated among the fresh entrants (15-29 years) to the labour force. Nothing much has changed over the years in this regard. If anything, this trend has got even more intensified. Around 84 per cent of the UPSS unemployment is now concentrated among the fresh entrants to the labour force according to the latest 2011-12 round.

Why is chronic unemployment concentrated among the youth? A plausible argument is that India's unemployment, unlike in developed countries, is not structural, not due to redundancies resulting from economic fluctuations, but secular in nature due to the growth of population and labour force. The share of the youth cohort is bound to be high among the fresh entrants to the labour force. With rising enrolments in education, most new entrants are also educated.<sup>4</sup> The two phenomena of high unemployment rates among the youth and among the educated thus are largely two sides of the same coin.

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, attendance in institutions of higher education, corresponding to graduation and above among those 20-24 years of age recorded the highest rates of growth in several decades

*contd...*

The rate of youth unemployment, defined as 15-29 years old, is higher at 6.1 per cent when compared to the overall rate of 2.2 per cent in 2011-12 on a UPSS basis. This differential of being higher by two to three times the overall unemployment rate is observable since the late 1970s onwards. The rate of youth unemployment at an all-India level has been pretty much flat at 5 to 6 per cent, very much like the overall rate of unemployment at 2 per cent since 1972-73. India's experience of a two to three time differential in this regard is also in line with most countries according to the World Bank.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1970s, the young educated category with higher than secondary education constituted 11.5 per cent of the total young labour force 15-29 years of age but accounted for one-thirds of total unemployment. The difference over the years is that the educated youth with higher than secondary qualifications constitute 33 per cent of the total young labour force but account for two-thirds of total unemployment on a UPSS basis in 2009-10. The tabulations of the 2011-12 survey are not available on education but are unlikely to change the basic fact that the educated youth account for a disproportionately large share of the chronically jobless in India.

Then and now, the rates of unemployment amongst the 15-29 age group systematically rise with the level of education. In 2011-12, it rose from 2 per cent in the case of illiterates, 4.9 per cent for those with primary and middle levels of education, 12.6 per cent for those with secondary education to a high of 25.7 per cent among graduates and above. "The unemployment problem is most acute among educated persons who are relatively young and belong to the age group 15-29, probably because they are relatively inexperienced and have expectations of jobs with adequate security," noted the Sixth Plan document. Not much has changed in this regard since then. (Table-1)

**Table-1**  
**Distribution of youth labour force and unemployment by education in per cent**  
**(15-29 yrs, UPSS status)**

	<i>Share in labour force</i>	<i>Share in unemployment</i>	<i>Unemployment rate</i>
Illiterate	17.6	4.4	2
Primary, Middle	49	29.8	4.9
Secondary	24.7	38.5	12.6
Graduate and above	8.6	27.3	25.7
Total :	100	100	8.1

Source: NSS Reports No. 537

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according to NSSO's survey in 2009-10. See Subodh Varma "More opt for higher education but even more drop out" Times of India, August 31, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> World Development Report 2013: Jobs, World Bank, Washington DC, pp 206.

India's rate of youth unemployment is also low and stable when compared globally. The comparisons are slightly different as the age group 15-24 defines youth in international statistics and the unemployment is derived on a current weekly basis. In 2011-12, the rate of youth unemployment in India has been stable at 10.7 per cent in 2011-12, not very different from 10 per cent in 1999-2000. By contrast, it has been above 40 per cent in South Africa and 50 per cent plus in Spain in early 2012 according to the World Bank. Indications are that it has worsened since then with rates as high as 56.4 per cent in Spain and 62.5 per cent in Greece. (Tables-2 & -3)

**Table-2**  
**Youth not in school or at work as a per cent of youth cohort (15-24 yrs, weekly status)**

	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Persons</i>
1999-00	12.2	56.5	33.6
2004-05	9.8	52	30.1
2009-10	8.7	50	28.1
2011-12	8.2	47.7	26.9

Source: NSS Reports No. 458, 522 & 537.

**Table-3**  
**Youth unemployment as a per cent of youth labour force (15-24 yrs, weekly status)**

	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Persons</i>
1999-00	10	10	10
2004-05	9.8	10.3	10
2009-10	9.9	11.5	10.2
2011-12	10.4	11.6	10.7

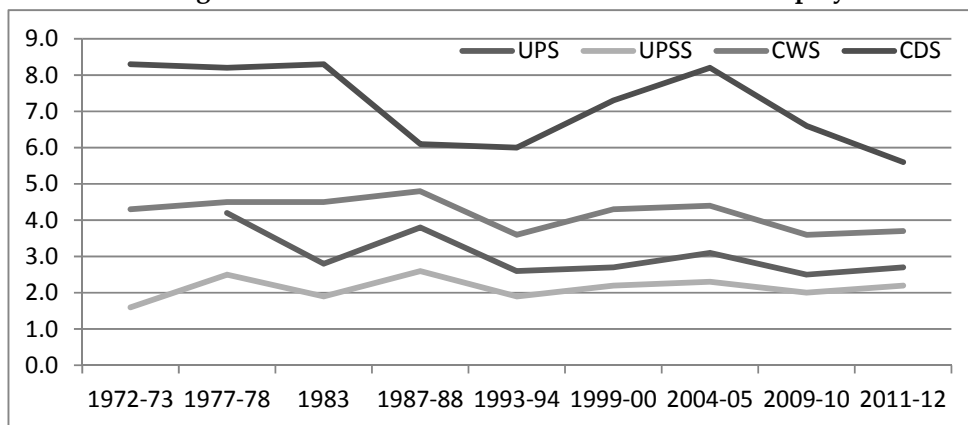
Source: NSS Reports No. 458, 522 & 537.

### 3. Narrowing Gap

For starters, the gap between the various measures of unemployment like the principal usual status, weekly and daily status rates of unemployment appear to be narrowing over time. This reflects the process of declining underemployment, especially in rural India. (See *Figure-1*) But this process is far from being a linear one. In the Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97) document, underemployment in 1977-78 as reflected in the differential between the principal usual status rate of 4.2 per cent and weekly rate of 4.5 per cent and the current daily status rate of 8.2 per cent was larger than in 1987-88 when the open unemployment rates were 3.8 per cent (principal usual status) and 4.8 per cent (weekly status) and the daily status rate only 6.1 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Eighth Five Year Plan, Vol. I, Employment Perspective, Planning Commission, Government of India.

**Figure-1**  
**Narrowing Differentials between Various Measures of Unemployment**



Source: Appendix Table-3.

However, underemployment was observed to rise between 1993-94 to 1999-2000 and 1999-2000 to 2004-05 due to the widening gap between principal usual status and current status measures according to the Eleventh Plan document (2007-12).<sup>7</sup> The current weekly rates provide a weekly picture of those who are chronically unemployed and the intermittent unemployment of those characterised as usually employed, caused by seasonal fluctuations in the labour market. The gap between principal usual status, weekly and daily status rates was much less thereafter till 2011-12, indicating lower underemployment in the labour market than earlier.

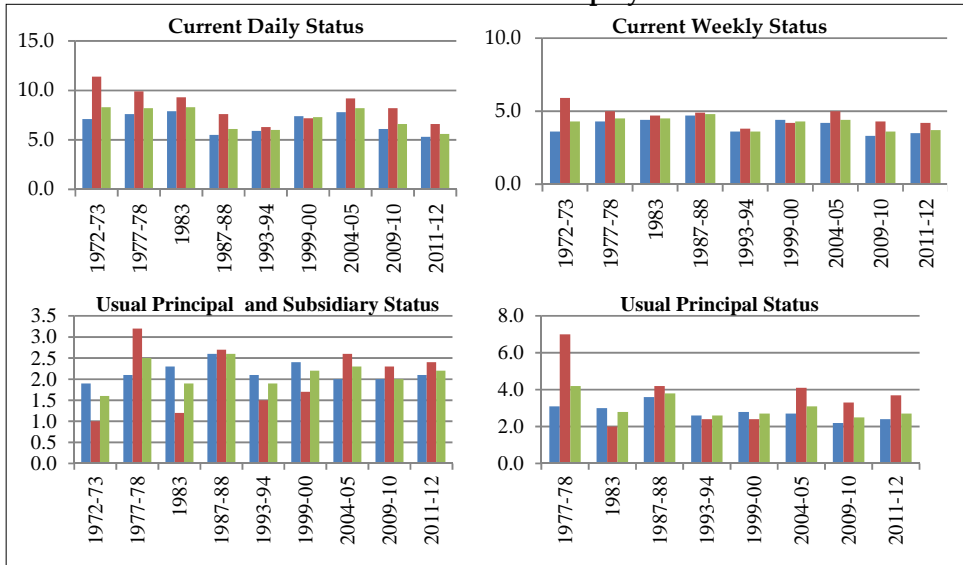
#### 4. Male-Female Differentials

The other important area where some changes can be observed is with respect to narrower male-female and rural-urban differentials in rates of unemployment, irrespective of UPSS, weekly or daily status. (See *Figure-2 & -3*) The rates of unemployment for females typically are higher than for males. Urban rates of unemployment are typically higher than for rural areas. Take the UPSS rates, for instance. Female rates of unemployment registered a high of 3.2 per cent against 2.1 per cent among males in 1977-78 after which their differential vis-à-vis males narrowed down by 2011-12.<sup>8</sup> Urban rates of unemployment earlier were 5-times higher than rural but this has come down to a gap of 2-times in 2011-12.

<sup>7</sup> Eleventh Five Year Plan, Vol. I, Inclusive Growth, Employment Perspective and Labour Policy, Planning Commission, Government of India.

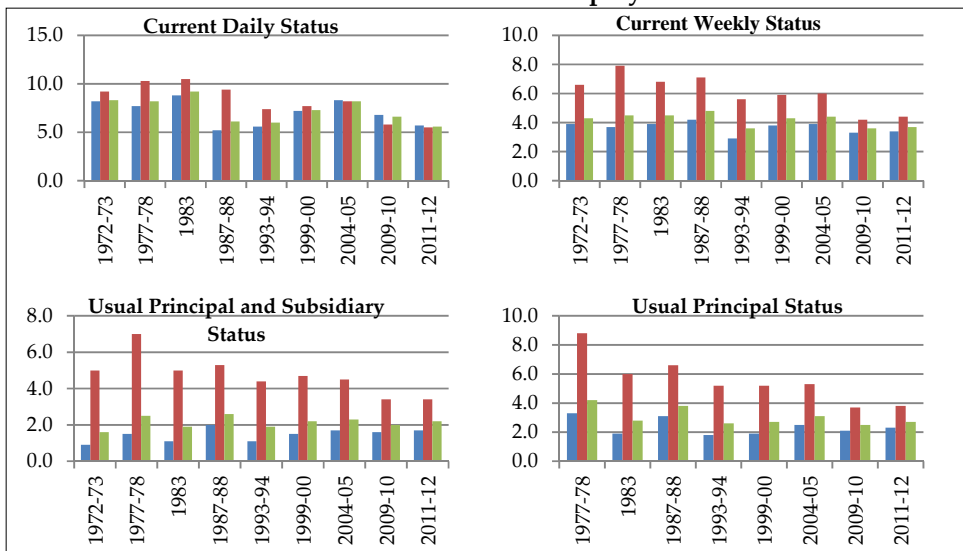
<sup>8</sup> See also Sonalde Desai who notes that NSS data show similar unemployment rates for women as for men "When incomes grow, but jobs elude" Indian Express July 31, 2013.

**Figure-2**  
**Male-Female Rates of Unemployment**



Note: Male, Female & Persons respectively.  
Source: Appendix Table-1.

**Figure-3**  
**Rural-Urban Rates of Unemployment**

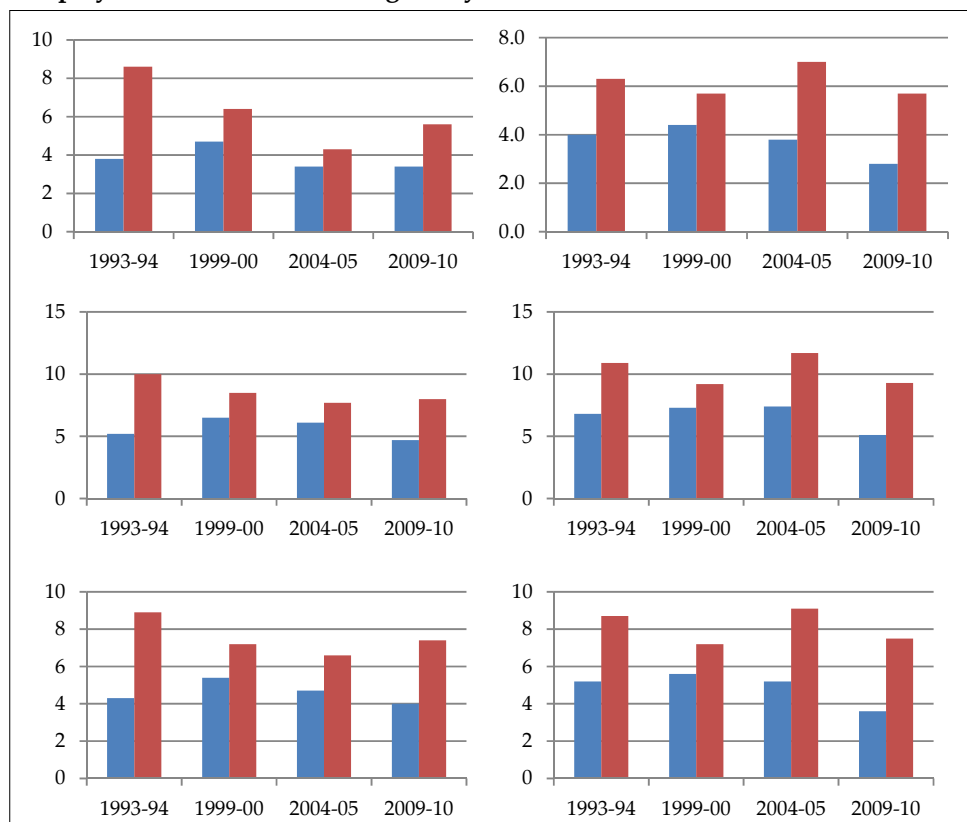


Note: Rural, Urban & Total respectively.  
Source: Appendix Table-2.

Narrower male-female differentials can be observed even within urban India, especially the metropolises or class 1 cities that have a million plus population irrespective of UPSS,

weekly and daily status. From 1993-94 to 2009-10, the gap between male and female rates of unemployment was much less in the metropolises when compared to smaller cities (50,000 to 1 million population) and towns (less than 50,000) population. (See *Figure-4*). Among the metropolises, these narrower differentials are observed particularly in Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Bhopal, Delhi, Howrah, Kolkata, Mumbai, Nagpur, Pune, Thane, Thane (Kalyan) and Varanasi. (See *Appendix Table-4*)

**Figure-4**  
**Unemployment Rates of Persons Aged 15 yrs and above in Class 1 Cities and Urban India**



*Note:* The top panel of male-female rates is by UPSS status; the middle is Daily and the below is Weekly status rates of unemployment respectively.

*Source:* Appendix Table-4.

These narrower differentials largely arise from a decline in female rates. The proximate factors perhaps are related to changes in the nature of employment, especially in rural India. There has been a secular decline in female worker-population ratios at an all-India level from 30 per cent in 1983 to 21.9 per cent in 2011-12, barring a marginal uptick in 1993-94 and 2004-05. This decline in employment, on a UPSS basis, possibly discourages women from looking for work, contributing to lower rates of unemployment. In other

words, the declining rates of joblessness reflect the discouraged worker effects of a severe employment crunch for women workers.

However, to establish the discouraged worker effect that pulls women out of the labour force is far from easy. The NSSO's surveys include those who are neither working nor available for work as not being in the labour force. This includes those who attended educational institutions, domestic duties, rentiers, pensioners, remittance recipients, the disabled, sick, beggars, prostitutes and children. In the absence of probing questions, it is difficult to figure out which of these categories would accommodate the discouraged women. Doing domestic duties is plausible although the share of women doing so has been stable and has risen only in 2009-10 over 1987-88 to 2004-05.<sup>9</sup>

Researchers, on the other hand, have suggested that with rising household incomes women are withdrawing from the labour force to concentrate more on studies. Supply-side changes in this regard are indeed important. The recent decades have witnessed an increase in female enrolment in colleges and other institutions of higher education, and a noticeable reduction in disparity in access to education. This factor certainly impacts the participation of women in economic activity and the search for work. In other words, the declining female-male unemployment rate differentials reflect income effects that have triggered a decline in labour force participation rates for women.

The difficulty with the above argument is that it does not necessarily hold for urban areas. Incomes have been rising in urban India as well. Female enrolment in school and colleges, too, has been on an uptrend in recent decades. Even so, female worker-population ratios in urban areas have not followed the downtrend in rural India. Roughly, 14 to 15 per cent of women were working in urban areas in 1983 and this proportion broadly held in 2011-12, on a UPSS basis, barring yet again a sharp uptick in 2004-05. The urban story is somewhat different as more and more employment opportunities are being generated for women.

The divergent trends in female workforce participation rates as between the rural and urban areas possibly reflect different positions on the well-established U shaped curve of female labour force participation rates. When incomes are low, female participation is high. As incomes rise in the course of development, the latter steadily tends to fall. The causes could be an income effect or a decrease in demand for female labour in agriculture. The rural workforce participation rates appear to be on this declining slope of the U curve, while the urban is on the upward sloping part. This happens when female education improves and they move back into the workforce in greater numbers.

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<sup>9</sup> The share of women doing domestic duties in the population at an all-India level was 31-32 per cent from 1987-88 to 2004-05, and sharply increased to 37.8 per cent in 2009-10 and 48.4 per cent in 2011-12.

In terms of absolute numbers, female employment on a UPSS basis in rural India shrank by 2.7 million jobs in just two years from 2009-10 to 2011-12. The magnitude of job losses goes up to 9.2 million if the reckoning is for work done over a major part of the year on a principal usual status basis. The difference between the two is subsidiary work that is temporary, casual or marginal in nature. By contrast, in urban India, female employment rose by 4.5 million on a UPSS basis and 3.5 million on a principal usual status basis over this two-year period. This employment crunch appears more severe if the comparisons extend further back in time.

Roughly two-thirds of women workers were self-employed on family farms in 1972-73 and this has declined with sharp swings along the way to 59 per cent in 2011-12. On the face of it, this appears to be line with modern economic development. There has been a steady rise in regular wage employment since 1993-94 but it is casual work that has grown somewhat irregularly in relative importance. Between 2009-10 and 2011-12, the share of casual female employment in rural India sharply fell from 39.9 per cent to 35.1 per cent. Due to difficulties in finding casual work in rural non-agriculture, there is again a small upswing towards self-employment.

## 5. Rural-Urban Differentials

Rural-urban differentials have narrowed because urban rates of unemployment have declined in all the measures of unemployment. In the case of daily status, the decline is much sharper with the urban being no different from the rural from 2004-05 onwards. Urban rates are generally higher as unemployment is more open in the cities and towns while underemployment prevails in rural India: With a “not too large a core of chronically unemployed remaining in cities and towns and partly also in smaller urban pockets, while there exist, centering round the cities and towns, concentric layers of seasonal or short term unemployment and underemployment with varying intensities and acuteness which engulf masses of population of different walks of life”, noted the NSSO report on the first quinquennial round in 1972-73.<sup>10</sup>

The broad context for narrower urban–rural differentials is the growing casualisation or marginalisation of the work force in both rural and urban India. This is what both the NSSO surveys and Census reports (1981 to 2011) have been indicating. While the farmer population is thinning out of late, there has been a steady rise in the number of agricultural labourers who outnumbered cultivators for the first time according to the Census of 2011 (See *Box-1*). In part, they also reflect a gradual decline in underemployment. The proximate causes for these trends require deeper research.

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<sup>10</sup> NSS Report No 255A, pp 39.



**Box-1**  
**The Marginal Economy**

The decennial census is a massive exercise involving a headcount of 1.2 billion people. The sheer scale and complexity of this undertaking does not lend itself to detailed probing questions that are possible, say, in the NSSO's five-yearly surveys. Even so, the numbers are robust enough to highlight major structural transformations in the economy. The latest Census of India 2011 highlights what the NSSO surveys have also been indicating, notably, the growing marginalisation of the workforce. The share of marginal workers in the workforce has grown from 9 per cent in 1981 and 1991 to 22.2 per cent in 2001 to 24.8 per cent in 2011. In other words, one in four workers in the Indian economy has worked for less than six months in a year. The share of marginal workers among cultivators was 10 to 11 per cent in 1981 and 1991 but it rose to around one-fifths in 2011. Among agriculture labour, their relative importance similarly increased from 13 per cent in 1981 and 1991 to 40 per cent in 2011. The proportion of marginal workers has also grown among other workers, who are mainly non-agricultural, from 3 per cent to 16 per cent over the period 1981 to 2011. One in five farmers working for less than six months reflect the crisis conditions in the agrarian sector, forcing them to seek work elsewhere. The same applies to agricultural labour. The growing marginalisation of other workers possibly reflects the fact that regular jobs have hardly increased or have declined owing to redundancies caused by technological and competitive compulsions, especially in larger enterprises. So a part of the regular workforce has been rendered marginal and most new jobs are of a marginal category. These propositions certainly indicate the sort of informal employment available in both rural and urban India that has a bearing on narrower rural-urban differentials in unemployment.

*Source:* Census of India 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011

The growth of employment in agriculture has generally been slow and declining and contrasts with much better prospects in non-agriculture. Owing to the pressure of population, the average size of land holdings is getting more fragmented over time. Farming at the margin, thus, is getting more unviable, forcing small cultivators to join the growing ranks of agricultural labourers. With less work on the farm, the rates of unemployment on a current daily status basis has been rising among agricultural labour households from 7.7 per cent in 1983 to a high of 15.3 per cent in 2004-05 before coming down a bit to 11.3 per cent in 2009-10.<sup>11</sup>

## **6. Unemployment among rural households**

The rising rate of unemployment among agricultural households on a daily status basis exemplifies this process of declining underemployment and open unemployment gaining ground especially in rural India. The 1977-78 NSSO survey analysed daily status unemployment for a limited classification of household types: Interestingly, rural agricultural labour households comprising 21.2 per cent of the all-India population accounted for 46.7 per cent of total daily status unemployment. (*Table-4 & -5*)

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<sup>11</sup> Unemployment among agricultural labour households was 7.73 per cent in 1983, 9.5 per cent in 1993-94, 12.29 per cent in 1999-00, 15.26 per cent in 2004-05 and 11.3 per cent in 2009-10 according to the NSSO survey reports.

**Table-4**  
**Analysis of Daily status unemployment situation by household type 1977-78 (%)**

	<i>% of population</i>	<i>Rate of unemployment</i>	<i>% share of unemployment</i>
<b>Rural</b>	<b>79.6</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>76.8</b>
1. Self employed households			
a. In agricultural occupations	40.9	2.68	13.5
b. Non agricultural occupations	8.4	5.49	5.6
Total :	49.3	3.16	19.1
2. Labour households			
a. Agricultural	21.2	15.82	46.7
b. Others	5.2	12.73	8.2
Total :	26.4	15.27	54.9
<b>Urban</b>	<b>20.4</b>	<b>10.34</b>	<b>23.2</b>
3. Other households			
a. Self employed in non agricultural occupations	7.9	6.04	5.3
b. Others	12.5	13-14	17.9
<b>Total Rural + Urban</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>8.18</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: NSS Reports No. 298

**Table-5**  
**Analysis of Daily status unemployment situation by household type 2009-10 (%)**

	<i>% of population</i>	<i>Rate of unemployment</i>	<i>% share of unemployment</i>
<b>Rural</b>	<b>72.7</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>76.8</b>
1. Self employed households			
a. In agricultural occupations	25.8	2.9	11.8
b. Non agricultural occupations	11.9	4	6.9
Total :	37.7	3.2	18.7
2. Labour households			
a. Agricultural	17.3	11.2	33.9
b. Others	10.8	10.6	17.1
3. Other households	6.8	8.1	7.1
<b>Urban</b>	<b>27.3</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>23.2</b>
4. Other households			
a. Self employed in non agricultural occupations	11.1	3.3	5.5
b. Casual and regular employees	16.2	4.8-12.5	17.7
<b>Total Rural + Urban</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: NSS Reports No. 537

So, if a typical chronically unemployed person in India is a young educated person 15-29 years of age, the person unemployed on a current daily status basis is typically an agricultural labourer in rural India. But there is an on-going churn in the labour market. Although there is a shift from the countryside, this is more to non-agricultural activities

in rural areas and less towards towns and cities as per the course of modern economic development. There has been a decline in the share of the self-employed and a gradual rise in the proportion of casual labourers—a process of casualisation that is mirrored in higher but stable daily status rates of unemployment.

According to Papola, Visiting Professor at the Institute for Studies in Industrial Development, "Agriculture is increasingly unable to productively employ the growing rural labour force. At the same time, there has been some growth of non-agricultural activities in rural areas in construction, trade, and services which have generally offered better earnings. Most of these employment opportunities have been of a temporary and casual nature."<sup>12</sup> The big factor of change, therefore, has been the growth of rural non-farm sector both in terms of GDP growth and employment generation that is more dynamic than the traditional farming sector.<sup>13</sup>

The daily status unemployment numbers reflect the declining share of rural agricultural households and rising share of non-farm labourers in all-India population and total unemployment. By 2009-10, the share of rural agricultural households was down to 17.3 per cent of all-India population and 34 per cent of daily status unemployment. By contrast, rural non-farm labour households comprise a growing share of all-India population and 17 per cent of daily status unemployment.

Then and now, the rural farm and non-farm labour households together account for more than half of daily status unemployment at an all-India level. While the overall rate of rural unemployment was 6.8 per cent, among agricultural labourers and non-farm labourers it was much higher at 11.2 per cent and 10.6 per cent respectively. In urban India, the overall rate is 5.8 per cent but among casual labour households the unemployment rate is closer to their rural counterparts at 12.5 per cent.

A point to note is that the growing casualisation of the rural and urban workforce is also reflected in the unemployment numbers on a weekly basis. NSSO surveys in 1999-00, 2004-05 and 2009-10 sought details from those who were 15-59 years of age and unemployed for all seven days of the reference week but had more or less regular work for at least some time in the past—the ever employed—such as duration of last employment and unemployment. If work less than six months is marginal work, as per the Census definition, the proportion of those whose duration of last employment was marginal in character is over 50 per cent and is rising over time.

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<sup>12</sup> Kaushik Basu, Annemie Maertens (Eds) "The Concise Oxford Companion to Economics in India", page 426.

<sup>13</sup> Hans P. Binswanger-Mkhize "The Stunted Structural Transformation of the Indian Economy: Agriculture, Manufacturing and the Rural Non-Farm sector", Economic and Political Weekly, June 29-July 6, 2013.

By broad educational groups, the proportion of ever employed whose duration of last employment was less than six months decreases with the level of education. Higher proportions are observed in the case of those not literate and literate with below secondary qualifications than those with higher secondary and above qualifications. Age-wise, the rising share of those with marginal work in their last employment is evident more for relatively older age groups like the 30-44 years and 45-59 years bracket. The upshot is that the experience of transient, intermittent employment is the lot of the relatively less educated and slightly older persons. (Table-6)

**Table-6**  
**Distribution of persons in the age group 15-59 who were unemployed for all days of the week by duration of last employment for each broad education group and age All-India (%) Marginal work (six months and less)**

<i>Education</i>	<i>1999-2000</i>	<i>2004-05</i>	<i>2009-10</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>1999-2000</i>	<i>2004-05</i>	<i>2009-10</i>
Not Literate	43.8	65.1	64.8	15-29	43.4	59.4	54.8
Literate but below Secondary	49.1	61.8	62.7				
Primary, Middle, Secondary		52.3	58.1	30-44	46.2	52.3	53.1
Higher Secondary and above	43.6	39.2	25.6				
						45-59	53.0
All 15-59 years of age	45.5	56.2	54.5		45.5	56.2	54.5

Source: NSS Reports No. 458,515 and 537

Two, as we have noted earlier, the current weekly status unemployment rates in India are much lower than is observed internationally. But with respect to the longer duration of unemployment of six months and more, they share some commonalities. While it is true that current weekly status estimates incorporate those who are chronically unemployed and the intermittent unemployment of those usually employed, the duration of unemployment of appears to be getting longer for the latter component as well. One-half of those who are 15-59 years of age and unemployed on all seven days of the week comprise the relatively longer-term unemployed in 2004-05 and 2009-10.

By broad education groups, the proportion of ever employed who suffered a relatively longer duration of unemployment increased with the level of education, especially those with higher than secondary qualifications. The proportion of such persons also decreased with age – in other words, a much higher proportion of those who have experienced relatively longer-term unemployment are found in the younger age groups like 15-29 than 30-44 or 45-59 years. No doubt, these are characteristics of the chronically unemployed but this also appears to the fate of those who experience intermittent and cyclical unemployment in the labour market. (Table-7)

**Table-7**

**Distribution of persons in the age group 15-59 who were unemployed for all days of the week by duration of unemployment more than six months All-India (%)**

<i>Education</i>	<i>2004-05</i>	<i>2009-10</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>2004-05</i>	<i>2009-10</i>
Not Literate	12.4	14.3	15-29	62.3	62.1
Literate but below secondary	45.9	42.5	30-44	32.7	25.8
Secondary and above	75.4	69.5	45-59	15.3	9.4
All 15-59 Years	51.6	51.5	15-59	51.6	51.5

Source: NSS Reports No. 515 and 537

Internationally, this feature was observed in US and labour markets of other advanced countries, especially after the global economic crisis of 2008-09. According to Nobel laureate Paul Krugman, “some unemployment is inevitable in an ever-changing economy. Modern America tends to have an unemployment rate of 5 per cent or more in good times. In these good times, however, spells of unemployment are typically brief. Back in 2007, there were about seven million unemployed Americans – but only a small fraction of this total, around 1.2 million, had been out of work for more than six months.”

“Then financial crisis struck, leading to a terrifying plunge followed by a weak recovery. Five years after the crisis, unemployment remains elevated, with almost 12 million Americans out of work. But what is really striking is the huge number of long-term unemployed, with 4.6 million unemployed for more than six months and more than three million who have been jobless for a year or more. Oh, these numbers don’t include those who have given up looking for work because there are no jobs to be found.”<sup>14</sup> Unlike India, a greater proportion of the long-term unemployed are in the 50-plus age group as their duration of unemployment is 53 weeks.<sup>15</sup>

Three, in India, 12.9 million persons 15-59 years of age were unemployed for all seven days of the reference week in 2009-10. Of these, 6.7 million of these ever employed persons were jobless for six months or more including 5.2 million for more than a year. To be sure, these huge numbers include not only the chronically unemployed but also those out of work due to fluctuations in the labour market who have a truly hard time finding jobs in an era of jobless growth. Or that they get work but that is largely informal or marginal in character. Is it then any wonder that the rate of weekly status unemployment remains low and stable at 3.7 per cent?

## **7. Concluding Observations**

The paradox of low and stable unemployment rates in a labour surplus economy like India has been taken as a point of departure for this paper. Various factors like the

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<sup>14</sup> “The Jobless Trap”, New York Times, April 21, 2013

<sup>15</sup> This estimate is from the US Labor Department and contrasts with 19 weeks for teenagers.

predominance of self-employment in agriculture have been adduced to explain the phenomenon of low chronic rates of joblessness. The average growth of employment has been more or less similar to labour force growth over time, the result of which is that the unemployment rate has not significantly changed over time. Amidst this picture of overall stability in rates, however, some changes have been examined.

The most noteworthy of these changes is the narrowing male-female differentials in the rates of unemployment as well as between rural and urban areas. The proximate factors perhaps relate to changes in the nature of employment, especially in rural India. The secular decline in female worker-population ratios at an all-India level possibly discourages women from looking for work, contributing to lower rates of unemployment. Although suggestive, there are difficulties in conclusively establishing such a discouraged worker hypothesis, except that a large proportion of them have instead taken up domestic work than remain idle. A U shaped participation curve is a plausible depiction of the divergent rural-urban trends in workforce participation.

The broad context for the narrower rural-urban rates of unemployment is the growing casualisation or marginalisation of the work force. This makes the future outlook for joblessness dismal indeed. The phrase jobless growth has been used to refer to a labour market situation in which growth is not creating adequate jobs, that it is not employment-intensive enough. The unemployment numbers will continue to reflect the fact the limited employment that is being generated is marginal or casual in nature in both rural and urban India.

An implicit assumption behind this paper perhaps is that demand-side factors are more responsible for the growth in joblessness, notwithstanding the low and stable rates of overall unemployment. The truth is that supply side factors, too, have a role to play. Positing a U shaped participation curve for females itself points to the possibilities of greater education leading to a rise in female workforce participation rate. In 2011-12, there are 10.8 million unemployed on a UPSS basis, bulk of whom are educated persons 15-29 years of age. With more and more of the young enrolling in secondary and college education, the growth of unemployment in absolute numbers is inevitable. India's problem of joblessness is serious as employment growth is far from adequate.

**Appendix Table-1**  
**All India: Unemployment Rate (%)**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Current Daily Status</b>			
1972-73	7.1	11.4	8.3
1977-78	7.6	9.9	8.2
1983	7.9	9.3	8.3
1987-88	5.5	7.6	6.1
1993-94	5.9	6.3	6.0
1999-00	7.4	7.2	7.3
2004-05	7.8	9.2	8.2
2009-10	6.1	8.2	6.6
2011-12	5.3	6.6	5.6
<b>Current Weekly Status</b>			
1972-73	3.6	5.9	4.3
1977-78	4.3	5.0	4.5
1983	4.4	4.7	4.5
1987-88	4.7	4.9	4.8
1993-94	3.6	3.8	3.6
1999-00	4.4	4.2	4.3
2004-05	4.2	5.0	4.4
009-10	3.3	4.3	3.6
2011-12	3.5	4.2	3.7
<b>UPSS Status</b>			
1972-73	1.9	1.0	1.6
1977-78	2.1	3.2	2.5
1983	2.3	1.2	1.9
1987-88	2.6	2.7	2.6
1993-94	2.1	1.5	1.9
1999-00	2.4	1.7	2.2
2004-05	2.0	2.6	2.3
2009-10	2.0	2.3	2.0
2011-12	2.1	2.4	2.2
<b>Usual Principal Status</b>			
1977-78	3.1	7.0	4.2
1983	3.0	2.0	2.8
1987-88	3.6	4.2	3.8
1993-94	2.6	2.4	2.6
1999-00	2.8	2.4	2.7
2004-05	2.7	4.1	3.1
2009-10	2.2	3.3	2.5
2011-12	2.4	3.7	2.7

Source: Various NSS Reports.

**Appendix Table-2**  
**All India: Unemployment Rate (%)**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Current Daily Status</b>			
1972-73	8.2	9.2	8.3
1977-78	7.7	10.3	8.2
1983	8.8	10.5	9.2
1987-88	5.2	9.4	6.1
1993-94	5.6	7.4	6.0
1999-00	7.2	7.7	7.3
2004-05	8.3	8.2	8.2
2009-10	6.8	5.8	6.6
2011-12	5.7	5.5	5.6
<b>Current Weekly Status</b>			
1972-73	3.9	6.6	4.3
1977-78	3.7	7.9	4.5
1983	3.9	6.8	4.5
1987-88	4.2	7.1	4.8
1993-94	2.9	5.6	3.6
1999-00	3.8	5.9	4.3
2004-05	3.9	6.0	4.4
009-10	3.3	4.2	3.6
2011-12	3.4	4.4	3.7
<b>UPSS Status</b>			
1972-73	0.9	5.0	1.6
1977-78	1.5	7.0	2.5
1983	1.1	5.0	1.9
1987-88	2.0	5.3	2.6
1993-94	1.1	4.4	1.9
1999-00	1.5	4.7	2.2
2004-05	1.7	4.5	2.3
2009-10	1.6	3.4	2.0
2011-12	1.7	3.4	2.2
<b>Usual Principal Status</b>			
1977-78	3.3	8.8	4.2
1983	1.9	6.0	2.8
1987-88	3.1	6.6	3.8
1993-94	1.8	5.2	2.6
1999-00	1.9	5.2	2.7
2004-05	2.5	5.3	3.1
2009-10	2.1	3.7	2.5
2011-12	2.3	3.8	2.7

Source: Various NSS Reports.



**Appendix Table-3**  
**All India: Unemployment Rates (%)**

<i>Year</i>	<i>UPS</i>	<i>UPSS</i>	<i>CWS</i>	<i>CDS</i>
1972-73		1.6	4.3	8.3
1977-78	4.2	2.5	4.5	8.2
1983	2.8	1.9	4.5	8.3
1987-88	3.8	2.6	4.8	6.1
1993-94	2.6	1.9	3.6	6.0
1999-00	2.7	2.2	4.3	7.3
2004-05	3.1	2.3	4.4	8.2
2009-10	2.5	2.0	3.6	6.6
2011-12	2.7	2.2	3.7	5.6

*Source:* Various NSS Reports.

**Appendix Table-4**  
**Unemployment rates of persons aged 15 yrs and above in urban India**

	1993-94		1999-2000		2004-05		2009-10	
	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>
<b>Daily Status</b>								
Agra	-	-	7.2	1.1	2.5	2.8	5.5	0
Ahmedabad	5.5	13.8	2.6	1.1	5.3	7.3	1.5	1.5
Bangalore	5.8	15.6	4.2	8.5	4.0	18.5	4.4	5.4
Bhopal	5.5	13.8	9.6	8.3	6.8	0	2.4	2.5
Chennai	9.4	15.7	9.2	4.5	6.4	4.1	7.9	22.1
Delhi	1.6	6.5	3.2	4.5	5.3	9.1	4.0	3.0
Howrah	-	-	9.7	14.5	4.4	11.9	1.8	0
Hyderabad	3.7	5.7	7.1	6.5	4.4	6.9	5.5	15.1
Indore	4.5	2.8	8.5	0.6	9.0	9.3	0.8	12.7
Jaipur	1.0	0.9	3.6	2.4	7.2	3.0	3.1	7.1
Kanpur	5.6	3.1	9.7	1.0	10.0	5.7	8.8	0
Kolkata	8.5	18.0	7.0	11.0	8.1	13.3	5.0	10.2
Lucknow	5.1	-	4.2	11.5	2.0	0	2.5	2.6
Ludhiana	1.1	-	1.1	1.4	1.7	4.1	7.7	14.9
Mumbai	6.0	9.3	8.5	13.6	7.5	6.9	5.7	10.2
Nagpur	7.3	12.2	7.8	3.9	5.7	6.3	3.6	7.5
Patna	-	-	7.3	29.0	13.7	23.5	14.2	36.0
Pune	5.5	6.7	4.5	3.0	8.5	5.6	6.3	0
Surat	7.4	4.4	2.1	1.9	1.7	5.2	0.6	4.4
Thane	-	-	6.9	13.9	5.5	8.9	2.9	1.2
Thane(Kalyan)	2.8	11.2	9.0	12.9	6.5	7.0	4.2	2.9

	1993-94		1999-2000		2004-05		2009-10	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Vadodara	2.8	3.1	5.5	9.5	10.9	18.8	7.0	4.0
Varanasi	-	-	6.8	1.9	5.2	9.1	3.1	1.5
Visakhapatnam	-	-	7.6	20.9	-	-	-	-
Class I Cities	5.2	10.0	6.5	8.5	6.1	7.7	4.7	8.0
<b>Weekly Status</b>								
Agra	-	-	4.2	-	4.0	-	5.5	0
Ahmedabad	4.4	14.9	2.2	1.0	3.8	3.6	1.2	1.2
Bangalore	4.4	14.8	2.9	8.1	1.3	17.2	3.8	5.1
Bhopal	3.8	7.8	6.1	7.7	6.2	0	0.1	0.9
Chennai	5.5	12.4	5.8	3.1	4.1	4.1	4.6	19.3
Delhi	1.5	6.3	2.5	4.0	5.1	9.0	3.5	2.8
Howrah	-	-	9.7	14.3	2.1	10.8	1.4	0
Hyderabad	2.5	0.6	6.5	4.4	4.2	6.7	5.4	14
Indore	4.4	3.8	7.9	0.6	6.2	0.9	0.8	12.4
Jaipur	1.0	0.8	3.6	2.3	3.1	2.0	2.8	6.5
Kanpur	5.6	3.0	9.4	0.9	8.2	5.4	7.7	0
Kolkata	6.2	15.7	5.2	8.9	5.9	11.1	3.8	9.4
Lucknow	3.8	-	4.1	8.2	2.0	-	1.6	2.3
Ludhiana	0.9	-	1.1	1.4	1.7	3.8	7.7	13.6
Mumbai	5.7	8.3	7.7	12.4	6.5	6.6	5.1	10.5
Nagpur	6.1	10.9	6.4	2.5	4.4	4.5	2.8	7.4
Patna	-	-	7.1	27.0	12.9	22.2	13.5	33.3
Pune	5.5	6.3	4.1	2.9	6.5	3.7	5.4	0
Surat	6.2	2.4	1.3	1.7	1.7	4.1	0.6	3.5
Thane	-	-	5.7	11.2	4.5	8.7	3.0	1.2
Thane (Kalyan)	3.0	17.2	8.7	10.5	6.4	4.8	3.0	2.7
Vadodara	2.8	2.6	5.4	7.5	10.1	18	5.6	3.1
Varanasi	-	-	6.4	1.6	2.7	6.9	1.9	3.7
Visakhapatnam	-	-	5.4	19.7	-	-	-	-
Class 1 Cities	4.3	8.9	5.4	7.2	4.7	6.6	4.0	7.4
<b>UPSS</b>								
Agra	-	-	1.9	0	0.2	0	5.5	0
Ahmedabad	4.4	13.7	1.0	1.0	2.7	2.7	1.3	1.2
Bangalore	3.8	13.4	2.9	8.0	1.2	13.7	3.5	3.6
Bhopal	4.6	7.4	3.9	4.4	5.6	0	0.1	0.9
Chennai	5.3	11.7	4.5	4.1	3.0	2.3	3.9	18.8

	1993-94		1999-2000		2004-05		2009-10	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Delhi	0.9	6.4	2.4	3.3	4.9	5.9	3.1	2.0
Howrah	-	-	9.7	14.3	4.9	5.4	1.4	0
Hyderabad	2.0	0.6	6.4	3.8	3.3	5.9	5.0	10.9
Indore	4.4	3.7	6.5	0	1.6	0	0.8	12.4
Jaipur	0.3	0.8	3.3	1.8	2.7	1.0	2.5	6.5
Kanpur	5.4	3.0	8.9	0.6	5.3	4.9	7.7	0
Kolkata	5.0	14.9	3.6	7.0	5.3	10.4	3.1	8.6
Lucknow	3.2	-	4.2	8.0	2.0	0	1.6	2.8
Ludhiana	0.7	3.7	0.9	1.4	1.2	0	8.3	13.6
Mumbai	5.3	7.1	6.8	11.7	3.1	5.3	4.2	6.8
Nagpur	5.7	5.8	5.0	2.5	3.5	1.7	1.1	4.7
Patna	-	-	7.5	17.4	11.3	18.2	13.2	23.9
Pune	4.8	6.1	2.5	3.1	6.2	1.0	5.3	0
Surat	5.2	2.9	1.3	0	0.2	1.1	0.6	4.0
Thane	-	-	5.0	14.4	2.4	0.4	1.5	0
Thane(Kalyan)	2.6	17.9	7.5	8.7	4.9	3.3	1.9	2.6
Vadodara	1.8	2.5	4.5	4.7	5.8	8.4	3.2	3.1
Varanasi	-	-	6.9	1.5	2.1	3.7	1.9	0
Visakhapatnam	-	-	5.6	15.0	-	-	-	-
Class 1 Cities	3.8	8.6	4.7	6.4	3.4	4.3	3.4	5.6

Source: 1) NSSO Report No 520, Employment and Unemployment Situation in Cities and Towns in India 2004-5

2) NSSO Report No 553, Employment and Unemployment Situation in Cities and Towns in India 2009-10

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## About the ISID

The Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), successor to the Corporate Studies Group (CSG), is a national-level policy research organization in the public domain and is affiliated to the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). Developing on the initial strength of studying India's industrial regulations, ISID has gained varied expertise in the analysis of the issues thrown up by the changing policy environment. The Institute's research and academic activities are organized under the following broad thematic areas:

*Industrialization:* Land acquisition, special economic zones, encroachment of agricultural land, manufacturing sector, changing organized-unorganised sector relationship, rise of service economy in India, training and skill formation etc.;

*Corporate Sector:* With special emphasis on liberalization-induced changes in the structures of the sector, corporate governance, individual firms/groups, emerging patterns of internationalization, and of business-state interaction;

*Trade, Investment and Technology:* Trends and patterns of cross-border capital flows of goods and services, mergers & acquisitions, inward and outward FDI etc. and their implications for India's position in the international division of labour;

*Regulatory Mechanism:* Study of regulatory authorities in the light of India's own and international experience, competition issues;

*Employment:* Trends and patterns in employment growth, non-farm employment, distributional issues, problems of migrant labour and the changes in workforce induced by economic and technological changes;

*Public Health:* Issues relating to healthcare financing, structure of health expenditure across states, corporatisation of health services, pharmaceutical industry, occupational health, environment, health communication;

*Media Studies:* Use of modern multimedia techniques for effective, wider and focused dissemination of social science research to promote public debates;

*Other Issues:* Educational policy and planning, role of civil societies in development processes etc.

ISID has developed databases on various aspects of the Indian economy, particularly concerning industry and the corporate sector. It has created On-line Indexes of 203 Indian Social Science Journals (OLI) and 18 daily English Newspapers. More than one million scanned images of Press Clippings on diverse social science subjects are available online to scholars and researchers. These databases have been widely acclaimed as valuable sources of information for researchers studying India's socio-economic development.

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