

# **India: Massive Unemployment and fear of Privatization of Railways is the main reason behind student unrest in Bihar**

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**In the past few days, in the state of Bihar, thousands of angry students and youths took to the streets and blocked railway tracks. Even though, the violent protests, were triggered by irregularities and discrepancies in examination conducted by the Railway Recruitment Board (RRB), the eruption and spread of the spontaneous agitation across the state, should be seen in the context of record unemployment, the underlying unrest and uncertainties among the student-youths and privatization of job-generating public sector enterprises like the Railways by the Modi government. A report by Anish Ankur from Patna.**

The Modi Government's ambitious plan to privatize the Railway, the biggest employer in the country, has given rise to fierce protests among students and youths. After a gap of more than four decades student unrest in Bihar spread like a wild fire despite the government's brutal crackdown. Railway job aspirants blocked railway tracks in protest against irregularities and discrepancies in competitive examinations conducted by the Railway Recruitment Board (RRB). The agitation of job aspirants caught the attention of opposition parties also as they extended their active support to statewide '*Bihar Bandh*' called by agitated students on 28<sup>th</sup> January. The actual issue of employment of students and youths came to the forefront of political discourse in the state pushing aside the divisive religion and caste based politics of the ruling classes. Such was the power and effect of the spontaneous students' protests that almost every political party, including the ruling one, wanted to be seen on the side of students.

The Railway Ministry took fifteen days to react to this matter and formed a five-member committee to examine the grievances of protesting students which will submit its report within March 4. Despite this announcement, the agitated students and youths could not be pacified. Sensing the adverse impact of the students' agitation in the neighbouring poll bound state of UP, Modi government roped in senior BJP leader and former deputy chief minister of Bihar Sushil Kumar Modi for damage control and he after consulting with the Railway Minister announced that the demands of students have been met to assuage the hurt feelings of protesting students and youths. But opposition parties termed this announcement as an eyewash to deceive the students.

## **Protests spread in Different parts of Bihar**

Student protests affected movement of trains not only in different parts of Bihar but in the neighbouring state of UP also. The enraged and angry students blocked railway tracks in Patna, Ara and torched four empty coaches of a stationary train in Gaya. In Nawada, students set ablaze a railway track maintenance engine, ransacked railway station premises and uprooted railway tracks. A large number of students also took to violent protests at Sitamarhi, Buxar, Muzaffarpur, Chhapra, Vaishali railway station and other parts of the state as well.

'Bhikhna Pahadi' locality, a hub of private coaching centers in Patna, turned into a battleground where job aspirants could be seen pelting stones on policemen. More than six policemen and dozens of students were injured in the clash. After the violent disturbances police forced the students to vacate various hostels in Patna.

A private coaching institute manager Anil Kumar condemned the vacating of hostels by asking " Why the government is doing this is beyond my understanding. Are the students criminals that the police are going after them and they are being driven away from their hostels?"

Protests were also held in Allahabad, in the poll bound state of UP, over the same issue. A group of students tried to stop a train in Allahabad. A case has also been filed against one thousand unidentified protesters for rioting and pelting stones. Following the protest in Allahabad, video clips allegedly of policemen forcefully entering the rooms of students and beating them have surfaced on social media. When opposition parties of UP voiced their concerns against the high handed attitude of police, six policemen have been suspended for the brutal crackdown on students.

### **Root cause of agitation : 35,000 posts, 12.5 million job aspirants**

Students are protesting against discrepancies by the Railway Recruitment Board (RRB) in the conduct of NTPC exam 2021. They are unhappy and angry over the inaccuracies in the results of the exam. There are two types of issues related to the railway examination, about which students are agitated. The immediate reason is regarding the examination for 35,277 posts of NTPC (Non Technical Popular Category) of Railways and 1.3 lakh vacancies of Group D.

### **Non Technical Popular Category (NTPC) issue**

Questions have been raised related to the Preliminary Test (PT) of Graduate level aspirants for 35,277 posts of NTPC. In the list of PT examination results the students were expecting a list with names numbering 20 times the sanctioned posts as was earlier promised. The railways published the same number of names in the result, but there are a large number of candidates who have been selected for more than one post. A candidate can be successful in more than one post, but he will be considered as one candidate should be counted as one person and not many. 40 percent of the candidates have been successful in more than two posts. Thus instead of seven lakhs candidates (twenty times of the thirty five thousand posts) only two lakh seventy six thousand have been selected in true sense.

About 4 lakh 24 thousands candidates (i.e. two thirds) are thus being excluded from the chance of appearing in the second and final examination. Initially it was decided that students with higher educational qualifications can also appear for the exams. Taking advantage of this criterion Graduate students passed in large numbers compared to intermediate level students. According to protesting students this was done to favor those with higher educational qualifications.

Therefore students are demanding the republication of a revised list of seven lakh candidates i.e 20 times of the sanctioned post. About 1.21 crore or 12.1 million applications were received for these vacancies but only 80 lakh or 8 million applicants could appear in the exam due to the Corona crisis.

### **Group D issue**

As far as the problems of group D job aspirants are concerned, their demand is that only one examination should be taken on the basis of the 2019 notification. For this 'Group D' post, a 12<sup>th</sup> class pass out or any graduate, aged 18 to 33 years, could apply. For this the candidates had to go through two papers of computer based exams, 'CBT-I and CBT-2', followed by a physical fitness test

and finally document verification and medical examination.

Protests erupted after the RRB and NTPC issued fresh notifications, only a few days ago, with a provision of two examinations. The protestors have claimed that only one examination was mentioned in the RRB notification issued in 2019. Those who have passed the earlier examinations and are waiting for their posting are now being asked to clear the mains examination also. The previous examination will be treated as a preliminary examination.

In 2019, three and a half years ago, when the Modi government completed its five years term, there was a ray of hope among the youths that if not two crore jobs as was promised in the election manifesto of the BJP in 2014, at least the railways is going to provide employment in large numbers. In the general election in 2014, Modi had come to power promising jobs in railways. The notification for these posts came on 12 March 2019. Results came out on 15 January 2022. Two years, 10 months and three days after the date of notification.

The examination is held in sixteen zones of the Railways. At present twenty one centers of the Railway Recruitment Board are functioning. RRB was established in July 1942 before independence. In 1953-54, the RRB operated from four places namely Mumbai, Madras, Allahabad and Kolkata. Later on the number increased to 21 centers. The number of jobseekers also went on increasing in lakhs and crores.

General Science, Mathematics, General Intelligence and Reasoning, General Awareness and Current Affairs were the subjects, solving 100 marks questions in 90 minutes to pass the exam. To compete and clear the examinations, students enroll themselves in various private coaching institutes paying hefty fees. For the vacancy of 1.3 lakh jobs of group D category 1.17 crore applications were received.

### **Railway Recruitment Board's (RRB's) response**

When the matter was highlighted after the publication of results the ministry of Railways issued a clarification that the second stage exam was clearly mentioned in the notification in 2019. RRB initially tried to take a hard stance on the violence by railway job aspirants by issuing a stern warning by saying that those involved in "illegal activities and destruction of government property" could be banned for life for any kind of jobs in the Railways. The statement by RRB warned "Demonstration on railway tracks, disrupting trains and damaging railway property reflects high levels of indiscipline, making those involved ineligible for government jobs. Assistance from special agencies would be sought to look into the video footage of the candidates involved in vandalism and apart from police action, they will also face life ban for railway jobs. RRB is committed to an unbiased and transparent recruitment process. Railway job aspirants are advised not to get misled by those using them for their vested interests."

But why did students take to the streets and violent protests? An angry student, Anil Kumar said "When the results came out for ten days we were trying to draw attention through social media like Twitter and Facebook. More than nine million tweets have been tweeted in just one week. But the government didn't pay any attention to our concern. Adding fuel to the fire, the government even managed to take down even our Hash tag in connivance with Twitter. Having left with no option we were forced to take to the streets. We started the movement from Rajendra Nagar Terminal. We never took the law into our hands. Everything was initially peaceful. No students indulged in anarchy. It's the police who resorted to lathicharge. This provoked the already angry-students. Many students got injured. A lot of severely injured students are still admitted in the PMCH (Patna Medical College and Hospital)."

He further went political “We supported the Modi Government in the hope that he will provide two crore jobs to us but he did nothing but now the Prime minister is selling everything in the public sector. Before 2024 he will compel us to sell our kidney, heart and lungs and then say look we are giving employment to these young people.”

But when students’ protests spread like wildfire and thousands of angry students in various parts of the state erupted spontaneously, the union Railway Minister came forward and constituted a committee to hear the grievances of both the successful and failed candidates of the RRB-NTPC preliminary examination, the results of which were released on January 15. The committee will submit its report by March 4.

The RRB and Patna district administration blamed the private coaching institutes for misleading the students. They specially pointed out one teacher called ‘Khan Sir’ for instigating students to go and block the railway tracks. In the meantime, an FIR was lodged at Patrakar Nagar police station in Patna against six teachers of different coaching centres, including ‘Khan Sir’ and 16 others. Faizal Khan popularly known as ‘Khan Sir’ runs a private coaching centre in Patna. FIR was lodged against six coaching institutes and 150 unidentified people in connection with the widespread violence and arson during protests.

Bihar’s opposition parties alliance ‘Grand alliance’ (Mahagathbandhan) consisting of RJD, CPI, CPI(M) and CPI(ML-Liberation) issued a joint statement and condemned the registering of criminal cases against students and teachers of private coaching institutes. The statement said *“We demand the withdrawal of cases imposed on students, youths and coaching centre owners and teachers. The government should understand the anger of students and youth. We urge the government to pay attention to the issues raised by students with patience and resolve them immediately.”*

The statement further alleged that the government is not so serious about solving the problem. *“If the government was really serious enough about the questions of students and youths then it should have conceded both the demands raised by them. In the first case, re-publication of seven lakh results of only one examination for group D is not so difficult a demand that cannot be met. The formation of an inquiry committee is a way to dilute the resentment of students. It is also clear from the repressive attitude of the government that it is not serious about resolving the issue.”*

The owners of the coaching institute who were supporting the students’ agitation in the beginning have surrendered and toed the government line and narrative when FIR’s were lodged against them. When these private coaching owners were booked, it seems, out of fear they issued statements in favour of the government and put the blame of discrepancies in examination on RRB officials.

For the first time in recent history, private coaching institutes came forward to support students’ demands. Those students who are studying in the private coaching institute for the preparation of examinations were considered to be apolitical in nature but the Narendra Modi government eagerness to privatize every public sector units particularly Railway, considered to be the biggest employer, have created suspicion into the young minds of Bihar and UP, particularly in the background of rising unemployment. As Sunil Kumar, who runs a private coaching institute in Patna, commented *“Unemployment is rising, therefore students and youths are angry. The whole system is derailed now. No one is looking after student interests. Unless you play with the students’ future they will not create disturbance.”*

The BJP and local district administration persuaded the leading coaching managers, by intimidating them to issue statements in the favor of the central government. In a video message the so-called Khan Sir said that the issue is now over since the government has conceded our demands. He further warned students to keep their distance from the statewide *Bandh* called by students and

supported by the opposition parties. In this video message Khan Sir cleared the culpability of the Prime Minister and Railway minister, and blamed RRB officials for the confusion.

For the time being, the ruling BJP has somehow managed to avert this crisis, which had the potential to hurt it electorally in the poll bound state of UP, by pacifying the protesting students. But, unless the central government does some serious course correction in its economic policies on the unemployment front, these sorts of violent student protests are bound to erupt time and again. As All India Student Federation (AISF) leader Pushpedra Shukla said, "Students are facing a lot of economic crises. New job vacancies are not coming up. Even If they come they take a lot of time. After the notification of 2019, three to four years will pass, till the results are out. But the decision to hand over Railways or Airways to private players takes only a few hours. The obsession of the Modi government to privatize Railway is the main reason behind the student unrest because it has sowed the seeds of suspicion among unemployed students that the government is bent on systematically eliminating government jobs. Students will rise up again and again because they have begun to understand that now their future is at stake."

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