

# India: Inside Patna's exam hub, where a million hopes die every year

Tuesday 6 September 2022, by [JOHARI Aarefa](#) (Date first published: 16 March 2022).

**Young people spend years to prepare for exams for government jobs. But the number of jobs is dropping and frustrations are boiling over.**

"Welcome to Exampur", a signboard in Musallahpur Haat announced.

In the impossibly dense neighbourhood in the heart of Patna, the streets are filled with an array of businesses: small grocery shops, cheap fast-food stalls, countless lodges for shared accommodation, bookstores with towering stacks of second-hand textbooks, and tucked away in the midst of it all, coaching centres like Exampur, that look tiny from the outside, but open out into large halls and classrooms within.

On the evening of February 10, I walked into a room on the ground floor of a four-storey building belonging to a coaching centre called "The Platform", and found a sea of students, mostly young men, and a few women, many in hooded jackets, all of them silently scribbling away. I was later told there were over 700 of them, and that they were writing a daily practice test. There was no teacher to monitor them, yet they laboured for an hour without a whisper or a peek into anyone else's paper.

"What's the point of cheating in a practice test?" one of them, Ajit Kumar, told me after the test. "We are all serious about preparing for the exams."

The exams that he was referring to aren't for admission into a college or university. Instead, lakhs of young men and women like him, drawn from nearly every village in Bihar, come to Musallahpur Haat and another Patna neighbourhood, Bhikhna Pahari, to dedicate two or three years of their lives to the arduous process of "taiyyari", or preparation, for competitive examinations that hold the key to highly coveted government jobs.

These aren't elite civil service jobs, like those of the Indian Administrative Services or Indian Police Services, which are categorised as Group A and Group B jobs. Patna's coaching industry focuses on exams for lower-ranking posts in Group C and D, which attract much larger masses of applicants from the hinterlands.

Ajit Kumar, for instance, was among the 2.7 crore applicants for 1.65 lakh vacancies announced by the Indian Railways' recruitment board in 2019.

The Railways has long held the reputation of being India's biggest public sector employer. Its lower-ranking jobs are particularly sought after by rural aspirants from Bihar, because they do not require proficiency in English.

Of the vacancies that were announced in 2019, 35,208 were under the non-technical popular category, or NTPC, for Group C positions like junior clerk, time keeper, commercial apprentice and traffic assistant. At least 1.25 crore students applied for these posts, a mix of graduates and those

who had completed Class 12.

The remaining 1.3 lakh vacancies were under the Group D category, for helpers, porters, gatemen, sanitation workers and other labourers. A total of 1.45 crore applicants applied for these posts - a large number likely in common with the pool of NTPC applicants.

For many of these positions, it is enough for applicants to simply have completed Class 10. But thousands of graduates, including Ajit Kumar, who has a bachelor's degree in commerce, had applied not just for the vacant NTPC posts, but also for the ones in Group D.

Under the seventh pay commission, the lowest salaries for a Group D Railways employee would be between Rs 15,000 and Rs 20,000 a month. In addition, they receive a slew of perks and allowances.

For Ajit Kumar's family, this would be a dream come true. Ajit Kumar's parents are agricultural labourers in the village of Haveli Kharagpur in Bihar's Munger district. On days that they get work, they earn a total of Rs 300 a day, while the little land they own yields just enough grain to feed themselves.

"A sarkari job is a sarkari job, and I am willing to take up any kind of post I get," Ajit Kumar said. "Even if it's just picking up garbage, it will still pay much more than any other work I can get in Bihar."

The immense demand for these jobs, even among graduates, is telling of the failure of the government, both at the Centre and the state, to create the kind of economic conditions that would ensure sufficient employment opportunities for young people.

In 2017-'18, unemployment in the country infamously reached a [45-year peak](#) of 6.1% - and that was before the pandemic. (In the aftermath of the pandemic, it rose as high as 11.84%, in May 2021, according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy.)

Despite the Narendra Modi-led government's efforts to boost manufacturing through its Make in India programme, [Economic Survey](#) data indicates that the share of new workers joining the manufacturing sector declined from 5.6% in 2018-'19 to just 2.4% in 2019-'20.

According to economist Dipa Sinha, the movement of employment from agriculture to manufacturing has traditionally been an indicator of growth in advanced economies. "But in India, the manufacturing sector has not been able to absorb the labour coming out of agriculture, and has not generated as much employment as one would expect," Sinha said.

Sinha added that the service sector, too has not offered stability of employment even though it has grown. "It is largely a low-productivity service sector, and the jobs are mostly informal and poorly-paid," she said.

In this scenario, coaching centres, like the ones in Patna, offer government job aspirants like Ajit Kumar the hope of a future with relatively stable income, upward mobility and improved social status.

Each coaching centre typically charges between Rs 300 and Rs 400 a month from one student, and enrolls between 2,000 and 5,000 students at a time. Almost all of the coaching centres are advertised with the names and photos of the teachers (always male teachers): Khan Sir, Naveen Sir, SK Jha Sir, Deepak Sir, and so on. Some of these teachers, particularly Faisal Khan and SK Jha, have developed a cult following online from across the country. "Khan Sir", for instance, has over 14 million followers on YouTube, where he uploads videos explaining concepts from various exam syllabi in

simple Hindi.

But while millions can access the coaching centres, only a fraction of them can get the jobs. The staggering numbers who apply for the relatively small number of posts means that most aspirants will be left frustrated.

This frustration has been exacerbated in recent years by a cocktail of factors: the downturn in the Indian economy after demonetisation in 2016, the loss of jobs and income during the Covid-19 lockdowns, and the increasing shift towards privatisation of public sector jobs.

In addition to these problems, the government mismanaged the recruitment process this year. A situation that had been simmering for many months came to the boil, leaving Patna's coaching universe shaken and the hopes of lakhs of job aspirants like Ajit Kumar even more fragile.

It began with a Twitter protest when there had been a delay of more than a year in conducting exams for the NTPC and Group D categories.

The NTPC exam is typically held in two phases - a preliminary test, followed by a main exam for shortlisted candidates. Group D posts, meanwhile, have so far usually been filled after conducting a single exam.

“We had at least six million tweets asking for the exams to be conducted,” said Rana Pratap Singh, a manager at the Khan GS Research Centre, one of Patna's most popular coaching centres for competitive exams.

The preliminary exam for the NTPC vacancies was finally held in batches between December 2020 and July 2021.

In early January, aspirants held a second Twitter campaign to protest the delay in the release of the NTPC exam results. The Railways attributed the delay to the pandemic, but students were not convinced. “The government did not delay any elections or rallies no matter how big the pandemic was, so why delay our exams and our results?” said Naiyar, a 23-year-old from the town of Jamui, who asked to be identified only by his first name.

When the NTPC results were finally announced on January 15, students were furious.

The Railways' notification had stated that the shortlist would contain 20 times as many names as the number of vacancies - since there were 35,208 vacancies, candidates expected a total of around 7 lakh names on the shortlist. But when the list was published, they found that many of the 7 lakh names were repeated. The Railways had listed high-scoring candidates under multiple categories of job posts and as a result, there were only around 3.5 lakh unique names on the shortlist.

Ajit Kumar, who missed out on the shortlist by just a few marks, felt bitter about this. “One candidate can only take up one job, so why did they name some people more than once?” he asked. “If they had published the full list without overlapping names, I could have had a chance, more of us could have had a chance.”

Meanwhile, the exam for the Group D vacancies of 2019 had not been held at all. When the exam date was finally announced on January 24, it came with [controversial amendments](#). First, the Railways Recruitment Board now planned to conduct not just one exam, as has been the custom for years, but two - a preliminary test on February 28, and a main exam later for shortlisted candidates. This, according to irate students, could delay recruitment by several more years.

The second amendment, like with the NTPC exam, had to do with the length of the shortlist. In 2019, the Board had claimed that the number of candidates named in the shortlist would be 5% greater than the number of vacancies. The amendment in January, however, stated that there would be no extra names - the ratio of candidates to vacancies would be 1:1.

“Students were very confused by this, because many of the Group D applicants had also applied for NTPC, as well as government jobs in other sectors,” said Navin Kumar Singh, the director of The Platform coaching centre. “If candidates on the Group D shortlist also qualify for other better-paying jobs, obviously they will not choose Group D jobs. So how will those vacancies be filled without extra names on the shortlist? It means they don’t plan to fill those posts.”

Here too, students felt cheated of the precious few opportunities they have to secure government jobs. “We give years of our lives to compete for these jobs,” said Naiyar. “We were already upset about the NTPC shortlist, so when this Group D notification came, the protests got out of hand.”

Harsh Agarwal (who requested that his name be changed in the story), a 25-year-old Group D applicant from Sitamarhi district pointed out that aspirants had waited nearly three years for the exam to materialise. “So how long will they take to conduct both exams and select the final candidates?” he said. “There are hardly any jobs available these days. Our families are struggling. How long can we afford to keep studying and waiting?”

In the last week of January, the frustration and anger over the alleged “dhaandhli”, or fraud, in the exams spilled out onto the streets of Patna and other towns across Bihar, grabbing national media attention for a few days.

On January 24, hundreds of students held a protest rally in central Patna against the Railways, which ended in a police lathi charge and the arrest of four students. On January 26, angry protesters in Gaya set an empty train [on fire](#), vandalised railway property and clashed with police forces. Several trains had to be cancelled as similar protests erupted in at least ten other districts in Bihar, as well as in parts of Uttar Pradesh.

“Lakhs of students who could have been on the shortlist felt cheated, and they protested on Twitter first,” said Rana Pratap Singh. “They took to the streets only later, when their online protest was not heard.”

Navin Kumar Singh observed that the protests “were not just one or two days of rage - they were a result of years of anger building up about the state of education and employment in Bihar.”

While protesters in Gaya and other Bihar towns undoubtedly turned violent and vandalised railway property, all the students I met in Patna insisted that their rally on January 24 - an allegedly spontaneous reaction to the Group D exam amendments - was entirely peaceful on their part. “The police was the one who started beating us with lathis,” said Ajit Kumar.

The Patna police filed a first information report against four arrested students, eight coaching class teachers and 13 other students, accusing them of rioting, assaulting public servants, unlawful assembly and other similar offences. From a crowd of hundreds, the four arrested students have borne the brunt of the police crackdown, and are still waiting for bail over six weeks after their arrest.

Among them, two of the students - Rajan Kumar and Kishan Kumar - have claimed they were not actually a part of the protest. They alleged that they were picked up by the police while they were simply passing by the area.

Kishan Kumar, a 21-year-old from Jharkhand's Giridih district, had been studying in Patna for over a year with the financial support of his brother, a waiter at a small restaurant in Ranchi. "Most of the 13 other students named in the FIR are just contacts from my brother's phone, people from Jharkhand," said Vivekanand Yadav, Kishan's brother Kumar.

Meanwhile, Rajan Kumar's father Umesh Mahto claimed that his son was brutally tortured by the police on the evening of his arrest. "When I met him in the lockup the next morning, he could barely stand up. The skin on his hands was torn and bleeding and the other boys said he could not even eat or go to the latrine by himself," said Mahto, crying helplessly when I met him in Patna. "Is my son a murderer or terrorist? How could they do this to him?"

Mahto, who hails from Lakhisarai district, works as a construction labourer in Patna. When Rajan Kumar moved to Patna to study for competitive exams, Mahto stretched his resources to give his son a separate rented room in Musallahpur Haat, just so that he could study without being disturbed. Before the protest on January 24, Rajan Kumar had actually made it to the shortlist of the NTPC exam.

"And now they are keeping my child in jail and ruining his entire future," Mahto said bitterly. "If they don't withdraw this case against him, how will he get any job later?"

Navin Kumar Singh is one of the eight coaching centre teachers that the Patna police has booked for allegedly inciting students to riot on January 24. Faisal Khan, the director of Khan GS Centre, was also one of the coaches booked, but he declined requests for an interview.

"The students were right to point out that a new rule like that should have been publicised and properly explained, instead of burying it in a 71-page notification," said Singh, who denied inciting any violence. "They protested because they are desperate and they got emotional."

While many teachers had put up YouTube videos explaining the problems with the NTPC and Group D recruitment process, they claim they have always encouraged students to protest online, on Twitter, rather than on the streets.

Rajesh Kumar, the chairperson of the Railway Recruitment Board's Patna division, claimed that the Board had indicated, in 2019 itself, that there might be two exams for Group D instead of one, "if needed". The reason for holding two exams was "to prevent cheating," he said. "If anyone cheats in the first exam, there is less possibility of them cheating in the second because there will be fewer candidates." He said he understood why students were anxious about more delays, but claimed that "holding exams during Covid with the protocols is difficult".

In a bid to contain the outbursts from job aspirants, the Ministry of Railways decided to suspend the pending NTPC main exam and the Group D exams until further notice. The government struck an offensive stance against the protestors, announcing that it would ban protesting students from any potential employment in the Railways. But with elections approaching in Uttar Pradesh, and the main challenger to the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Samajwadi Party, raking up the jobs issue, the government was forced to do some damage control: it set up a committee that was tasked with listening to candidates' grievances and reporting them to the board.

Since then, protests have subsided and several student representatives have given their statements to the committee. But the suspension of the exams has only added to the anxieties of students like Ajit Kumar.

"The problem is much deeper than these exams," Ajit Kumar said. "The problem is that the number of government jobs available have reduced in the past five-six years, and there are few other

opportunities for us.”

I met 24-year-old Ajit Kumar in Patna in February, in a room on the ground floor of a four-storey building that belonged to The Platform in Musallahpur Haat.

In classrooms that can seat over 700 students, tutors teach maths, English, various sciences, reasoning, general knowledge and other subjects need to clear exams for jobs in the railways, police, public banks and central or state government services.

He spoke candidly about everything in his life: his family’s poverty, his schedule studying 14 hours a day, his desperation to crack any exam that could land him a government job.

Eight years ago, in 2014, Ajit Kumar’s older brother had migrated to Patna’s student hub to train for the Bihar Staff Selection Commission exams for a variety of subordinate-level posts in state government offices. The vacancies had been announced that year, but it was only four years later, in 2018, that the Commission actually conducted the exam.

Ajit Kumar’s brother did not make it, and by the time the results were announced, he had already returned home and taken up agricultural labour. The family could no longer afford to support his education or stay in Patna – not with Ajit Kumar himself ready to graduate and enter the sarkari job rat race.

Ajit Kumar arrived in Patna in 2019 and for the past year, he has been enrolled at the Khan GS coaching centre, preparing for the Railways exams.

When I asked him what he had wanted to be when he was younger, he fumbled and turned red. “Um...I did have dreams, but it doesn’t matter now,” he said after much hesitation.

When I urged him to share more, he let out a pained laugh. It was clear he did not want to talk about it at all.

“I had a lot of plans for my career, but my family’s situation is not good, so...uh...now I am doing only this,” he said, gesturing towards the room around him.

Life in the student belt of Patna often involves a rigorous schedule of attending coaching classes, attempting practice tests and organising group study sessions. Most students choose not to take up part-time jobs to fund their studies, because they spend at least 14 hours a day studying. Their families can often send them no more than Rs 3,000 or Rs 4,000 a month, so they contend with harsh living conditions.

“We are four boys sharing a room meant for two people, so we have to take turns to sleep there,” said Rakesh Kumar, a 23-year-old job aspirant from Banka district, who looked sleepless and dazed on the evening that we met. “When I have to sleep in the day shift, I study at night.” These are not too different from the conditions his father and three brothers live in as migrant construction workers in Delhi.

Since the onset of the pandemic, financial instability has made survival even harder for Patna’s students.

“In the last week of every month, we usually run out of money and have to live without proper meals,” said Naiyar. “There are days when we just eat a bit of dry khichdi once or twice a day, while we wait for the new month to begin. Sometimes, money does not come even in the new month. This did not happen before Covid.”

It isn't easy for families to support the aspirations of these young people. In Bihar, where most farmers are either landless or have small land holdings, agriculture has never been enough to sustain entire households. The population has no significant industrial sector to depend on either: the once-thriving [sugar industry](#) has largely closed down since the mid-1990s, and few other industries have been established or promoted in the state. Masses of Biharis, therefore, have been migrating for daily-wage or low-paying work for decades, and view government jobs as the best possible form of employment to strive for.

When the Covid-19 lockdown was enforced nationally in March 2020, migrant and unorganised sector workers across the country – many of them from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh – were the first to lose their jobs, incomes, savings and food security. Students like Harsh Agarwal, who had already spent over two years training for competitive exams in Patna, felt an odd sense of validation about their decision to persist as job aspirants.

“Because of Covid we understood the real value of a government job,” said Agarwal. “During the lockdown, people with sarkari jobs remained employed and got paid too, even if their salaries may have been cut a little. But people in private jobs lost everything.”

Like every other household in their village, Agarwal's family, in Sitamarhi district, has suffered for the past two years. In 2016, after failing to pass any competitive exam for government jobs, Agarwal's brother migrated to work in a garment factory in Tamil Nadu. His income was just enough to support the family and pay for Agarwal's education, until he lost his job with the lockdown.

“He did not have a job for almost two years after that, and we had to use up our savings to survive,” said Agarwal. “Now my family is encouraging me to keep trying for government job exams, even though it means I won't earn for another few years.”

Beyond such economic reasons, however, there are also cultural reasons for Bihar's obsession with pursuing government jobs.

Rakesh Kumar explained it with a phrase used by many of the students I met. “*Sarkari naukri se gaon mein rutba hi alag ho jata hai,*” he said. A government job can give a person a new status in the village.

In his village of Kamathpur, where 90% of the residents are landless farm labourers, only a handful of people have managed to secure government jobs over the years. Their standard of living has improved, Rakesh said, but they also get more respect from the local community, “even if it is a menial Group D job”.

In hushed tones, students also spoke about an open secret in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh: the “rate” that government jobs fetch in the marriage market. Someone with the lowest ranking Group D job, for instance, can demand at least Rs 15 lakh as dowry. “We know it's illegal, and young people now think differently,” said Agarwal. “But this tradition has not really changed much.”

The Railways' workforce has declined significantly over the years, much to the frustration of Bihar's youth. The organisation employed [15 lakh](#) people in 1998-'99, but now has a workforce of 12 lakh. In February, railways minister Ashwini Vaishnaw stated in Parliament that at least [2.65 lakh posts](#) lay vacant in the Railways, and that the process of filling them up was “continuous”.

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For students and coaching centre teachers in Patna, this is a laughable claim.

“Our main problem is that vacancies are not announced or filled in a timely manner,” said Meeta Rai (who requested that her name be changed for this story), 24, a student from Sitamarhi who has spent the past four years in Patna studying for at least six different competitive exams. “Posts are vacated every year, but they don’t publish them. They make do with less staff.”

While central government agencies tend to conduct their exams and recruitments almost every year, she said, the Railways have increasingly become an exception.

“Back in 2008-’09, Railway vacancies would be announced every two years and they would open up for applicants right after the Class 10 exams,” said Rana Pratap Singh. The gaps grew wider over the years, and between 2014 and 2019, there was a five-year gap between announcements for new NTPC posts. The 18,252 posts announced in 2014 took four years to actually fill, and now the 2019 batch of applicants faces a similar, if not longer, wait.

Rajesh Kumar from the Patna Railway Recruitment Board denied that the vacancies in the Railways were not being filled in a timely manner. “Ten years ago, even if the frequency of recruitment was higher, there were fewer vacancies being announced each time,” he said.

Bihar’s state government recruitments are even more notorious for delays.

The state’s Staff Selection Commission, for instance, has not yet completed recruitment for vacancies announced eight years ago. “The exam was held in 2018, then the results were cancelled because of a paper leak, then a re-exam took place in 2019,” said Rana Pratap Singh. “Even though they finally published the results last year, many candidates are still waiting for their appointments. Their entire financial planning has been stuck for eight years.”

The situation is far worse in Bihar’s police force and public schools.

In 2017, the state had among the worst [police-citizen ratio](#) in the country, with one police official for every 839 citizens. Despite this, Bihar had not filled sanctioned vacancies of 34,000 police personnel.

Similarly, Unesco’s 2021 State of the Education Report for India found that Bihar had a severe shortage of primary and secondary teachers in public schools, with [2.2 lakh posts](#) lying vacant. For years, the recruitment process, through the State Teachers’ Eligibility Test, has been interrupted by allegations of corruption and mismanagement. Job aspirants have held protests every year to demand their rights.

Beyond the recruitment woes local to Bihar, aspirants also feel pushed into a corner by what they describe as the central government’s policy of privatisation.

In 2014, a [study](#) by the Indian Staffing Federation found that as much as 43% of the government sector employed contract labour to get its work done. In the years since then, the trend has only been on the rise.

In the Railways, for instance, the government paved the way in 2019 for private companies to run and operate [entire trains and railway stations](#). It aims to privatise over 150 trains and 99 stations by 2027. This would imply privatisation of all the workers needed on those trains and stations.



A Railways employee in eastern Bihar, who asked to remain anonymous, said that privatisation of many Group D and Group C posts has already been underway in the past few years. "Pantry cars in trains are now fully privatised, as well as many of the posts of gangmen, sanitation workers, peons and even the technicians who wire the rail lines," said the worker, who managed to get appointed last year as a locopilot, a Group C post. "Meanwhile, so many thousands of sanctioned government posts are just lying vacant."

In the aftermath of the pandemic, students like Naiyar have been particularly sour about the sheer lack of security in these low-grade private jobs. The wages are poorer than in government jobs, the contracts are short and finite, and the workers, he said, are always at the mercy of the management.

"Government jobs have permanency and can make us stronger, but the government's policy is to make us weaker," he said.

Naiyar, who is from the largely agricultural town of Jamui, prides himself on having parents who are both graduates. His father has a meagre income as a local tuition teacher, but has made sure his children studied well. Now, as the eldest of five siblings, Naiyar is determined to secure a government job, and is relieved that he made it to the shortlist of the NTPC exam in January.

"I study really hard for my exams, and one of the things I have studied is general knowledge, about everything in the world," he said, peppering his Hindi with English words. "Adolf Hitler had said that a leader should make the public so weak, that they start feeling grateful just to get basic food to eat. And that is what this government is doing by privatising more and more jobs."

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