

Book of jobs

Better ways to track employment data are necessary for meaningful policy responses

The government has begun field work to compile a new Periodic Labour Force Survey to track employment trends more swiftly, in order to generate quarterly reports on the urban labour market situation and annual dossiers on the overall employment scene. With well over 80% of the workforce employed informally (with no contractual rights), Statistics and Programme Implementation Minister D.V. Sadananda Gowda's assertion that the Survey will also attempt to capture such workers' employment status is welcome. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is now expected to meet officials, including Niti Aayog Vice-Chairperson Arvind Panagariya, to discuss issues related to job creation and the recommendations of a task force set up to officially capture the employment status of India's workforce more effectively. The task force had been constituted amid a growing sense of concern, even within industry, about the lack of adequate jobs created and fresh talk of 'jobless growth'. The only official job data available, based on surveys conducted by the Labour Bureau since late 2008, have painted a gloomy picture on new jobs for the world's youngest workforce in the first two years of the Narendra Modi government.

India's employment data are far from robust and not timely enough to enable meaningful policy responses for emerging job market realities. Government officials too have questioned the reliability of the Labour Bureau exercise that covers only a few sectors in select States. Niti Aayog member Bibek Debroy, for instance, has said that existing jobs data can be used to claim both 'growth-less jobs' and jobless growth, given India's largely informal economy. The task force is considering the use of proxy measures such as car sales to incorporate informal employment generation into the official narrative. How the recommendations of the task force will be incorporated into the new labour force survey, for which work began in April, needs to be seen. While it is never too late to spruce up statistical systems, the timing of this exercise is odd. Chief Statistician T.C.A. Anant expects the results of the first Survey, awaiting approval for more than a year, to be released by December 2018. The most comprehensive existing employment survey conducted quinquennially by the National Sample Survey Office has not been done since 2011-12. The UPA government had commissioned an out-of-turn survey then as the 2009-10 survey presented an overtly gloomy job market in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. In contrast, the NDA government will go to the next Lok Sabha polls having released just one comprehensive labour force survey, close to the end of its term. Importantly, given the new coordinates, the Survey may not be strictly comparable with past data.