

Decoding Career Aspirations of the
young urban poor
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Decoding Career Aspirations of the Young Urban Poor

Where are we failing? – Why understanding career aspirations of the young urban poor is critical to bridge the employability gap

Do we understand what our youth hailing from urban poor contexts want in a career?

Demystifying what youth want: An in-depth analysis of career aspirations of the young urban poor

According to a recent report by National Sample Survey Office's labour force survey, half of India's working age population (15 years and above) [is not contributing to any economic activity](#). The labour force participation stood at [49.8 per cent in 2017-18](#), falling sharply from 55.9 per cent in 2011-12, with nearly quarter of young urban jobseekers remaining unemployed during the December quarter of 2018. Moreover, around 30% of India's youth aged 15-29 years are '[not in employment, education or training](#)' (NEETs), faring much worse than other major developing countries, according to [an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\) report](#) released last year. These alarming statistics signal the widespread distress in the job markets and the demographic dividend [could turn on its head](#) if the youth is not productively engaged. While an estimated [8 million jobs are required every year to keep employment rate constant at 52%](#), there are multiple challenges plaguing the ecosystem emanating from low level of education, high dropout rates and mis-match between supply of skills and demands.

What is really happening here?

One of the most important challenges, often overlooked, is the misalignment between [career ambitions of the youth and opportunities available](#) in the job markets. Therefore, it is of little surprise that India's youth is [overwhelmingly pessimistic about job prospects](#). It is imperative in today's context that any strategy to accelerate employment, must take into account the aspirations of the youth and find innovative solutions to match ambitions and skill sets with job markets.

While studies about [youth aspirations have been conducted](#) for an urban context, little to no information is available about the aspirations of youth hailing from the urban poor sections. What are their dreams and aspirations? What kind of jobs are they interested in? What are their skills and abilities? What obstacles are they facing in their pursuit of a career of choice? To answer some of these questions Antarang Foundation, a non-profit which works to bridge the Employability gap that exists amongst disadvantaged youth, conducted a dipstick primary research to delve into the dreams and aspirations of the youth belonging to low-income backgrounds, residing in urban settings.

Research Design

Primary Research:

Objective: Decoding the life context, motivations, attitudes, perceptions towards goals and aspirations, challenges and uncovering trends in career aspirations of youth (18-22 years) hailing from the urban poor context.

Methodology: Study was primarily qualitative in nature, detailed focus group discussions were conducted with a sample of 20 students (equal number of boys and girls) in groups of 3-4 students.

Profile of respondents:

- Residing at slums of Chandivali and Ghatkopar
- 9 were pursuing graduation
- 7 had just completed their 12th standard
- 4 had dropped out of the education system
- Average monthly income of the families of the respondents was reported to be around Rs 12000-15000 per month
- Parents typically in jobs like construction workers, domestic help, drivers and into small businesses.

Secondary Research:

We analysed secondary data from our internal database of career aspirations of nearly 31000 youth. These youth were a part of our core services 'CareeAware' and 'CareeReady' programmes.

Some findings of the exercise are:

Respondents showcased varying mind-sets and attitudes with respect to having career goals and aspirations

A psychometric profiling of the respondents, with respect to their career ambitions, presented three distinct profiles of respondents:

- Aspirers: They had specific career goals and were making efforts to achieve the same. However did not always have access to resources required to pursue their goals. Around half of the respondents were recognized to be into this category.
- Dreamers: These respondents had high imagination and dreams, however currently are not making any efforts to follow their ambitions.
- Nonchalant: These respondents did not seem to have any goals for their career and were not making any efforts to change their status quo. There was an evident absence of ambition and direction in these youth.

Youth hailing from Urban poor contexts were overwhelmed by the looming crisis of unemployment and slow growth

The study found that the fear of unemployment is a tangible threat for the under privileged youth. Most respondents shared that media reports of slow job growth coupled with real-life experiences of friends and relatives' struggling to find jobs are the primary reasons for this concern. In addition to this are challenges like little to no awareness of possible career avenues, half-baked understanding of what a work life or career entails and the lack of resources to overcome financial and cultural obstacles.

Being a graduate no longer has a competitive edge, vocational and skill development courses in demand

Most respondents reported that being a graduate is not adequate in today's context. 21 year old Swati* stated that having just a graduation degree is considered to be inadequate and supplementary work/technical skills are mandatory to be able to find a job and build a career. Higher education (post graduate degrees) are seen to be valuable, as it is perceived to have a competitive edge and that it aids in growth of their professional careers. However, it was not seen to be a viable option for most due to lack of resources and the pressure to start contributing to the family income. Therefore, respondents indicated interest in pursuing job-specific training for specific roles or careers through vocational, skill-development or career-development short-term courses.

Youth hailing from urban poor context feel they lag behind in new-age, essential work place skills

Most respondents expressed concerns about lacking 'human-centric' skills which are now required to excel in any work environment. Traits like ability to communicate fluently (especially in English), to work in a team, having a positive and work-place conducive body language and personality etc. were reported to be challenging to acquire and practice. There is also prevalent a perceived lack of self-esteem and confidence which harboured feelings of being inadequate. The study found that this fear prevented some of the respondents from having a certain kind of aspirations for themselves as it was deemed 'unattainable'. Most respondents were also vocal about concerns like fear of producing unsatisfactory results at workplace, inability to meet expectations of peers and seniors, workplace intimidation by bosses and seniors and adjusting to unaccustomed office cultures.

As a result of lack of workplace skills, guidance and fear of what to expect in a work environment most respondents admit that they did not feel prepared to enter job markets. As is evident, the concerns are not only about getting a job, but also about adjusting to a work culture, which can sometimes be daunting for the inexperienced youth.

Internet and social media enabled role-models motivating youth to dream big

The study found that access to information through internet and social media due to availability of low-cost data is a great equalizer which was earlier only within the reach of their more affluent, privileged counterparts. For a few respondents who did not have any role models in their immediate circle of family and friends, Internet and social media has bridged the gap and provided access to positive influencers.

About 1/3rd of the respondents shared that they follow inspiring and motivational public figures on platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Youtube. For e.g. 19 year old Ankit* follows entrepreneurs and self-made businessmen on Youtube and one day dreams of starting his own business. 18 year

old Sangeeta* shared that she looked up to a friend who has her own Youtube channel where she pursues her passion for singing, song-writing and playing instruments. 18 year old Abbas*, who has a passion for acting, shoots videos showcasing his acting ability and shares it on his profile on Tik Tok. He proudly states that he has 1800 followers on the platform and dreams of increasing his followers and become popular. Most other respondents shared that they used internet for listening to lectures and understanding academic concepts through various resources available online for free.

However, while it enabled them to have role models and dream of various possibilities, when probed, a dichotomy was observed as these respondents did not have access to resources to follow the paths of these virtual-life role models. Therefore, the internal conflict between the reality of their grim situations and their dreams were apparent.

Few girls want to chase unconventional careers, most want to pursue gender typical job profiles

Most girls interviewed were quick to point out the very perceptible discrimination and obstacles faced in their journeys of pursuing a career. While most of them are pursuing their graduation and wish to work in full-time careers, they shared that cultural and social barriers often restrict the nature of jobs they wish to pursue. As a result, 4 of the 10 girls interviewed expressed interest to be a teacher, which is considered to be a 'decent profession' with flexible timings and is a family-approved choice of profession. Few others wish to work in jobs in an office environment which is close to home and has fixed timings.

Interestingly, few girls expressed desire to pursue unconventional careers like joining army or police force, pursuing civil services to become an IPS etc. 21 year old Deepa* wants to join the police force and has started taking Karate classes to ensure that she is physically fit and prepared for her tests. She stated that her elder sister, who was married off early, is now not allowed to work. She is adamant that she will not marry into a family which would restrict her from following her ambitions.

Youth want to invest in self-development to ensure career progression

Most respondents reported that the pressing financial conditions at home mandate them to start earning an income immediately after graduation. A few respondents felt that it is important to keep learning and growing themselves, in order to stay relevant in a professional setting. They expressed interest to continue studying and obtain a higher education degree through night schools or distance learning opportunities, to obtain a post-graduate degree, while working in a full-time or a part-time job. They planned to save money from their earnings and use it to further learn or develop their skills.

Youth have limited understanding and awareness about career options and intrinsic skillsets

It was found that the respondents had a very limited understanding of different sectors and profiles in which they could explore career avenues. Most of the respondents stated they wish to pursue 'office jobs' which signified working in an office environment, on a computer and receiving a fixed monthly remuneration. However, upon probing it was revealed that apart from a few profiles like sales and marketing, most were not aware of what kind of roles they could pursue or what those

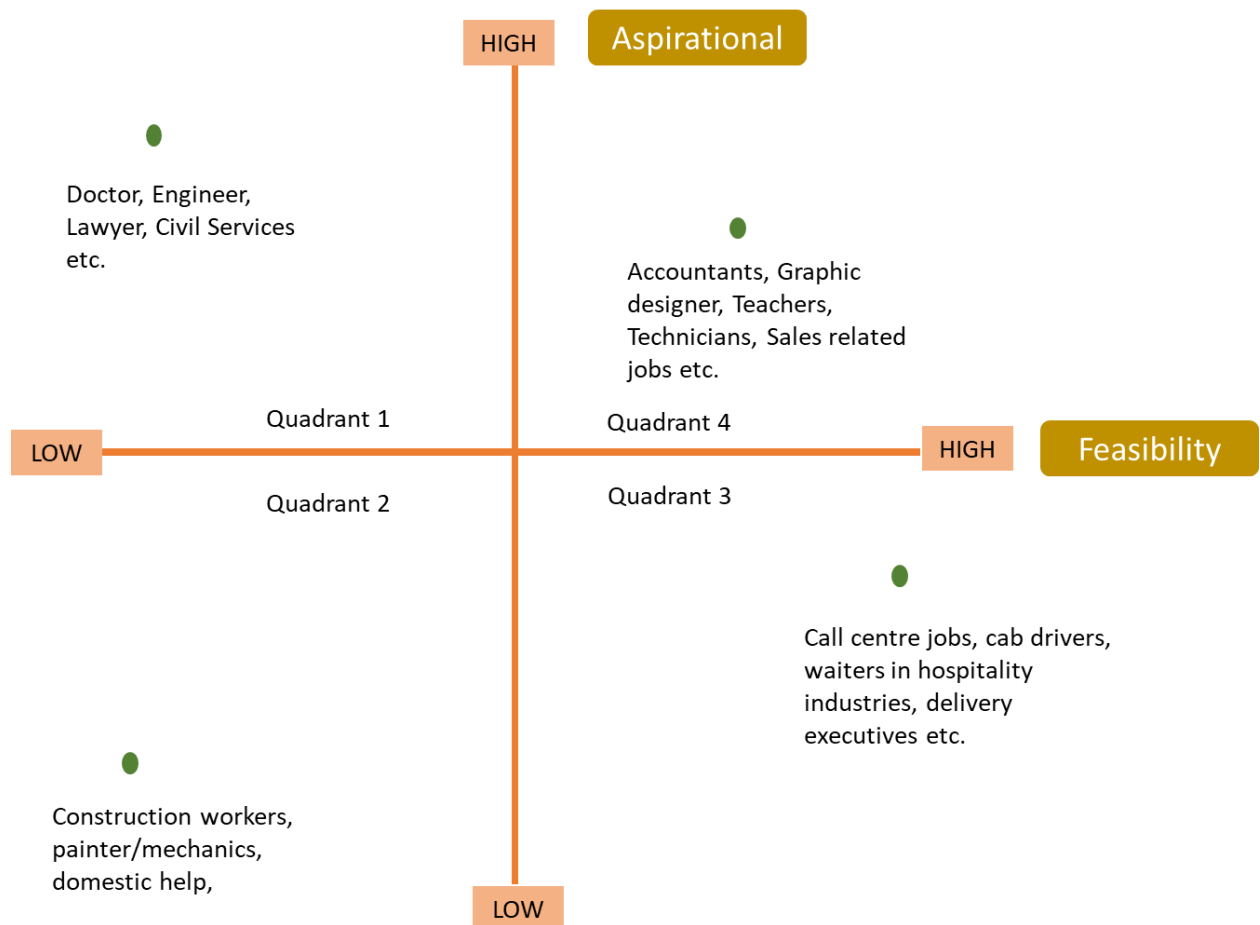
profiles entail. For e.g. Ankit* stated that he wants to work in a bank, however does not have an idea of the different functions within a bank and hence does not know which roles he wants to pursue. Most respondents are also not aware of their abilities and skill sets or what kind of profiles can suit their interests.

'Aspiration' for the youth is closely linked with 'feasibility'

The study found that for the youth interviewed, the decision to pursue (or not pursue) a stream of career was made based on two key parameters:

- The first criteria is how 'aspirational' they find the job to be. This is not only dependent on how engaging or interesting they find the job to be, but also how "respectable" they find a job to be. 'Respectable jobs' are the ones which garner a certain degree of admiration and approval from their peers, parents and society in general.
- The second criteria, which is often only subtly talked about, is how 'feasible' or practical it is to pursue a career in a particular field. This is judged based on multiple factors like access to financial resources and technical/functional skills and acumen needed to excel in the field.

The following 'Aspirations-Feasibility' matrix displays the career aspirations reported by the respondents.



- **Quadrant 1** has jobs which is high on 'Aspiration' but extremely low on 'Feasibility' like doctor, engineers, lawyers, being an entrepreneur etc. All kinds of government jobs were also considered to be highly respected and hence aspirational. (It is interesting to note that this is in contrast with aspirations of the youth of the privileged backgrounds where they are moving away from government jobs and a large number of millennials and post-millennials have an entrepreneurial mindset and want to start their own businesses.→) Youth stated that while they find these jobs to be highly aspirational, they currently do not possess the resources or capabilities to be able to pursue these jobs. Therefore only 2 of the 20 interviewed stated that they want to pursue a career in these fields.
- **Quadrant 2** has jobs which are very low on both 'Aspiration' and 'Feasibility' like construction site workers, domestic help, office peons, painters etc. These were not considered to be 'respectable' jobs and were also not 'practical' to pursue these jobs considering they at least have a basic education and the wages earned would be too low to make a living of it. None of the respondents wanted to pursue these jobs.
- **Quadrant 3** is moderately low on 'Aspiration' but high on 'Feasibility' and has jobs like delivery executives, cab drivers, call centre jobs etc. These jobs were seen to be not very 'respectable', but are an easy way to start earning an income. Around 1/3rd of the respondents said that they saw themselves working in these jobs at least at some point in their careers. Some want to use these jobs as a platform to gain experience and as a stepping stone to better paying jobs.
- **Quadrant 4:** is moderately high on both 'Aspiration' and 'Feasibility'. Profiles like salesperson, accountants, admins/operations, graphic designers, teacher etc. in sectors like Banking and Finance, Education, Media and Hotel and Hospitality etc. were cited by the respondents. As these jobs strike a good balance between 'aspiration' and feasibility', majority of the respondents (around 2/3rd) reported that they wanted to pursue a career in these fields.

Other key findings

- An aspirational starting salary is considered to be Rs 12-15000 per month.
- However, some reported that they would consider starting at lower salaries if there are guaranteed opportunities of yearly hikes offered by the companies. Respondents expect a minimum hike of Rs 1000 per year.
- Youth are open to unpaid internships as a segue to gain experience, learn and access full-time job.

What does this mean for the Employment Eco-system?

As organizations working in the domain of career guidance, skill development and employment for youth (non-profits, potential employers or government), the different kind of mind-sets (Aspirers, Dreamers and Nonchalant) need to be handled differently in order to accelerate them on their path. While the 'Aspirers' might need quick access to resources and opportunities, the 'Nonchalant' might need one-on-one career counselling to discover the underlying reasons of this inherent lack of interest. Trainers/teachers working with the students need to be sensitized to understand and recognize the difference, and adopt techniques to be able to support the students depending on their needs. A one-size fit all training or career guidance mechanism for students may need to be re-evaluated.

The following steps are also critical for any organization working in this domain:

1. Recognizing aspirations: Investing in understanding what the core motivations, intrinsic abilities and aspirations are is the foremost requirement to any career or skill training programme.
2. Building awareness: Educating the youth about the various career avenues available to them and the aptitudes and skills required to excel in those career options.
3. Building ability: Once the right match has been made between aptitude, aspirations and appropriate career avenues, their skills and abilities need to be improved.
4. Providing access: Access to resources which can accelerate them on their path like linking them to training programmes, skill development or vocational programmes.

Integrating these key steps, Antarang Foundation offers two key programmes called the CareerAware and CareerReady programme.

- The CareerAware program guides students in making a career choice, in the light of their better understanding of careers and themselves, which finally translates into a self-defined career plan. CareerAware uses an easy to navigate tool that guides the adolescents towards understanding themselves through customized psychometric tests, understanding the many career options open to them, and then planning their own careers by marrying the two. Once the tool is administered, the students are counselled on a one-on-one basis with the help of automated customised individual career counselling reports.
- 'CareerReady' program teaches core employability skills that help youth in the age-group of 18-28 years understand what is expected of them in a structured workplace. Upon completion of the program, students are connected to a career option of their choice, which could be higher education, fulltime or part-time employment jobs, internships or vocational training opportunities in their area of interest.

For the purpose of this study, Antarang Foundation analysed the most recent 'career aspirations' data (from 2017 to date) which is internally collected post the interventions to map the nature of jobs/careers the trainees wish to pursue.

- For the CareerAware programme, data collected from 30787 students were analysed and the following findings emerged:
 - The most common aspirations cited were doctors (9%), Engineer (6%), Armed forces (5%), Fashion designing (4%), Artist (singer/dancer/musicians, 4%), Interior Designer (3%), Lawyer (3%), Pilot (3%), Accountants (3%) and Teachers (3%). Other career options that were mentioned were architects, bank tellers, beauticians, event management, nurse, content writer, journalist etc.
- Specifically, for the CareerReady programme, in the last two years, post the programme, of the 1676 who graduated of the programme, 298 were available for job linkages after completion of the programme, and the rest opted to go for higher education. Of the 298 who were available/willing to opt for career linkages, 36% wanted to pursue a vocational course, 42% were looking for part-time jobs or internships and 20% were looking for full-time jobs, depending on their current needs, interests and contexts. The self-reported aspirations of the students post the intervention were in industries like Media, Hospitality, Travel and Tourism, Education, Beauty and Grooming, Healthcare, Banking and Finance, Advertising and Public Relations, Fashion, Event Management, Sports, IT, Fitness and Social Sector etc.

An interesting observation is that post the interventions, the awareness of self (interests, capabilities and aptitudes) and of the job markets increases and hence the articulation of their aspirations is specific and nuanced.

Apart from access to skill-based functional training, soft skills like communication, ability to work in a team, being creative and innovative etc. are equally essential to boost confidence and esteem. For prospective employers, having an informal training system in place which eases them into the office culture might help in increasing workplace satisfaction and retention. Helping them socially blend into an office culture through measures like having an 'office buddy', or 'office mentor', creating a support system etc. will help this transition. Employers can also think about offering innovative solutions to help them grow in their professions (like encouraging them to pursue higher education while working with them by co-funding their higher education or providing flexible work timings etc.) to boost their productivity and workplace satisfaction.