

Unemployment and Social Alienation in India: A Statistical-Sociological Exploration

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Abstract:

Unemployment is not merely an economic indicator but a complex social phenomenon that has far-reaching consequences on individual identity, social relations, and societal integration. This paper explores the intricate relationship between unemployment and social alienation in India through a statistical-sociological lens. Using data from national surveys, including the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), alongside theoretical frameworks from Marx, Durkheim, and Seeman, this study investigates how joblessness contributes to a sense of powerlessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement among various demographic groups. The paper also evaluates the role of caste, class, gender, and urban-rural divides in mediating this relationship. The findings underscore the urgency of holistic employment policies that incorporate not just economic metrics but also social well-being and inclusion.

Keywords: Unemployment, Social Alienation, India, Statistical Sociology, PLFS, Seeman's Theory

1. Introduction In contemporary India, unemployment has emerged as one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges, transcending mere numbers and economic graphs to deeply impact the everyday lives and psyches of millions. While unemployment is traditionally understood as an economic problem—measurable in terms of job loss, underemployment, and reduced labor force participation—its implications extend far into the social fabric. The economic incapacitation of individuals due to unemployment often translates into psychological disempowerment, erosion of identity, community disintegration, and the disintegration of social norms and expectations. These consequences, although intangible, manifest themselves in the form of social alienation—a feeling of estrangement from society and the self.

India, with its diverse demographic composition and complex socio-economic stratifications, presents a unique landscape for exploring the multidimensional impacts of unemployment. In a nation marked by rapid urbanization, a burgeoning youth population, and persistent inequalities of caste, class, and gender, the failure to secure meaningful employment does not merely stall economic progress—it generates a profound crisis of belonging and social

integration. Despite being one of the fastest-growing economies, India grapples with high rates of joblessness, particularly among educated youth, women, and marginalized communities such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The mismatch between educational qualifications and market demand, along with systemic exclusions, creates a fertile ground for growing disillusionment and socio-psychological detachment.

This paper embarks on a comprehensive sociological exploration of how unemployment contributes to social alienation in India. Using statistical tools and survey data drawn from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), and qualitative narratives from unemployed individuals, the study probes the underlying structures and lived experiences that make unemployment more than just a numeric deficiency. By blending empirical evidence with sociological theory, particularly drawing from the works of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Melvin Seeman, the paper provides a nuanced understanding of the psychosocial toll of unemployment.

Karl Marx's notion of alienation, developed in the context of capitalist modes of production, emphasizes the estrangement of workers from the product of their labor, the production process, fellow workers, and ultimately, themselves. While Marx discussed alienation within the realm of exploited labor, in the Indian context, alienation also arises from the absence of labor—unemployment. This lack of productive engagement leads to similar forms of disconnection and psychological turmoil. Emile Durkheim's theory of anomie adds another layer of understanding, highlighting how sudden societal changes and economic disruptions can lead to normlessness, thereby affecting individuals' sense of purpose and belonging. Melvin Seeman's analytical breakdown of alienation into five dimensions—powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement—provides a structured framework for measuring and interpreting the lived realities of unemployed individuals in India.

The central argument of this paper is that unemployment in India is not merely an economic dysfunction but a deeply social phenomenon that fosters alienation at both the individual and collective levels. The consequences are not uniform across the population; rather, they are shaped and intensified by socio-cultural variables such as caste, gender, education, and geography. For example, a Dalit woman in a rural area may face multiple layers of alienation—economic, social, and emotional—that are qualitatively different from those experienced by an upper-caste urban male graduate. Therefore, the sociological study of unemployment must go beyond generalized metrics and delve into the layered and intersectional experiences of alienation.

Furthermore, the Indian state's response to unemployment has largely focused on economic remedies—skill development programs, employment guarantees like MGNREGA, and start-up incentives. While these initiatives have made some strides, they often fail to address the sociological dimensions of the problem. There is little attention paid to how unemployment erodes self-worth, breaks down community bonds, or fuels anti-social behavior and mental health crises. Social alienation, if unaddressed, has the potential to spiral into larger societal issues such as crime, substance abuse, and political disenfranchisement. Therefore, any comprehensive employment policy must integrate psychological support, community engagement, and efforts to foster social inclusion.

This paper, structured across eight sections, begins with a conceptual understanding of unemployment and social alienation, followed by a review of key sociological theories. It then outlines the methodology, presents statistical and qualitative findings, and concludes with policy recommendations. Through this exploration, the paper aims to contribute to the growing discourse on unemployment by highlighting its social dimensions and urging for a more holistic, inclusive, and humane approach to employment in India.

2. Conceptual Framework:

Unemployment in India is not merely an economic condition but a deeply embedded social issue with far-reaching implications. The absence of gainful employment, particularly among youth and marginalized communities, contributes to rising levels of **social alienation**, mental distress, and societal fragmentation. This conceptual framework aims to explore the interlinkages between **unemployment** and **social alienation**, using both **statistical trends** and **sociological theory** to develop a grounded understanding of the issue.

2.1 Unemployment in India

Unemployment in India remains a persistent and multifaceted challenge that cannot be examined solely through the lens of economic indicators. It encapsulates a wide array of issues ranging from the quality of education and employability of graduates, to systemic exclusions and structural inequalities embedded within the labor market. Unemployment is formally defined as the situation where a person, capable and willing to work, fails to find gainful employment. However, in the Indian context, this definition must be expanded to consider underemployment, disguised unemployment, and the informal sector where employment is often precarious and poorly remunerated.

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022-23, the overall urban unemployment rate stood at 6.8%, while the rural unemployment rate was lower at 4.4%. However, these aggregate figures obscure deep-seated disparities. Youth unemployment, for instance, is significantly higher. Among individuals aged 15–29 years, the unemployment rate exceeds 17%, particularly in urban centers where the demand for white-collar jobs often outpaces supply. Moreover, unemployment among educated youth—especially those holding graduate or postgraduate degrees—is paradoxically higher than among those with lower educational qualifications. This phenomenon, often referred to as 'educated unemployment', reflects a misalignment between educational systems and labor market needs.

Gendered disparities further complicate the picture. The female labor force participation rate in India remains one of the lowest in the world, and even among those actively seeking work, women face higher rates of unemployment. According to PLFS data, female unemployment was around 9.4%, significantly higher than the 6.1% for males. Societal norms, familial responsibilities, and safety concerns often restrict women's mobility and access to employment opportunities, especially in semi-urban and rural areas.

Caste and class dynamics also play a significant role. Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) frequently face discrimination in hiring processes and are overrepresented in informal or insecure jobs. For these communities, unemployment is not just a question of economic deprivation but also of social exclusion and marginalization. The geographical dimension adds another layer of complexity, as

employment opportunities are heavily concentrated in a few urban and industrial hubs, leaving vast rural and tribal areas economically stagnant.

Government interventions such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have aimed to mitigate rural unemployment through wage employment schemes. However, these programs often fall short of providing long-term economic security or skill development. Similarly, urban employment schemes remain fragmented and underfunded. The current digital economy and platform-based employment systems, while offering new avenues for work, also exacerbate precarity through gig and contract-based labor, which lacks social security and job permanence.

In sum, unemployment in India is a complex, multidimensional issue shaped by educational inadequacies, socio-cultural barriers, structural inequalities, and policy shortcomings. Its consequences ripple across economic and social spheres, making it a subject of significant sociological inquiry.

2.2 Social Alienation

Social alienation refers to a condition in which individuals feel estranged or disconnected from the society, their community, and even from their own sense of self. It is a deeply subjective experience that often emerges in the context of social, economic, or political marginalization. In the realm of unemployment, alienation manifests in profound ways, affecting not only how individuals perceive their own worth but also how they relate to others and engage with social institutions.

Melvin Seeman, a key sociologist in the study of alienation, proposed five dimensions through which alienation can be understood: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. These dimensions offer a useful framework for understanding the psychological and social toll that unemployment imposes.

- **Powerlessness** refers to an individual's perception that they have no control over the events that shape their lives. Unemployed persons often feel helpless in influencing employment outcomes despite their efforts.
 - **Meaninglessness** captures the loss of a sense of purpose. Work is not merely an economic activity; it is a source of identity and meaning. Its absence often leads to a crisis of significance.
 - **Normlessness** or anomie arises when societal norms become ambiguous or ineffective. Prolonged unemployment can lead to a breakdown in moral regulation, resulting in frustration, aggression, or apathy.
 - **Isolation** describes a lack of belonging or emotional detachment from community and social networks. Unemployed individuals frequently report withdrawal from friends and family due to shame or perceived judgment.
 - **Self-estrangement** denotes the alienation from one's true self. It is often expressed in feelings of depression, worthlessness, and the inability to pursue passions or goals.
- These dimensions are not isolated; they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For instance, a person experiencing prolonged unemployment may initially feel powerless, which could then lead to meaninglessness and ultimately result in social isolation and self-estrangement. In the Indian context, these feelings are often magnified by the stigma attached to unemployment, especially for men who are socially conditioned to be primary breadwinners.

In this paper, social alienation is operationalized using Seeman's framework and analyzed through both statistical measures and qualitative narratives. Understanding alienation as a multi-dimensional construct allows for a more nuanced and empathetic exploration of the lived experiences of unemployment. This sociological lens is essential for designing holistic employment and welfare policies that prioritize not just economic recovery but also social reintegration and psychological well-being.

3. Theoretical Background

Understanding the relationship between unemployment and social alienation in India requires a strong theoretical foundation that bridges classical and contemporary sociological thought. Three key sociologists—Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Melvin Seeman—offer critical insights into the ways individuals experience disconnection from society due to economic disruptions such as joblessness. Their perspectives enable a multifaceted analysis of how unemployment manifests not only as an economic issue but also as a deep-rooted social and psychological crisis.

3.1 Karl Marx: Alienation of Labour in a Capitalist Economy

Karl Marx's theory of alienation is fundamental to the sociological understanding of how individuals become estranged from their human potential in capitalist systems. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx identified four types of alienation experienced by workers under capitalism: from the product of labor, from the labor process, from their fellow workers, and from their own species-being. These dimensions of alienation result from workers being reduced to mere cogs in the machine of production, with no ownership or control over their work.

For the unemployed, alienation manifests even more intensely. They are not just estranged from the product of their labor—they are entirely excluded from the labor process itself. In a capitalist economy such as India's, where rapid economic growth has coexisted with rising unemployment, especially among youth and the educated middle class, the alienation of the unemployed becomes a lived reality.

This estrangement from the means of production leads to feelings of powerlessness and normlessness. The capitalist structure thrives on commodified labor, and those who cannot commodify their skills are rendered socially invisible. In India, unemployment among marginalized communities such as Dalits, Adivasis, and rural populations further entrenches class and caste-based exclusion, reinforcing Marx's idea of systemic alienation under capitalism. Moreover, in urban centers, the proliferation of informal jobs that offer neither security nor dignity adds a new layer to the alienation experience.

Thus, Marx's analysis provides the ideological framework to interpret unemployment not merely as a failure of individual capabilities but as a systemic byproduct of capitalist accumulation that disempowers and isolates entire segments of the population.

3.2 Emile Durkheim: Anomie and Economic Dislocation

While Marx focused on class-based alienation, Emile Durkheim's concept of *anomie* offers a complementary perspective rooted in the breakdown of collective norms and values. In *The Division of Labor in Society* and *Suicide*, Durkheim argued that sudden economic upheaval or rapid social change could result in normlessness, where individuals no longer feel guided by

the moral standards that once regulated society. This condition, which he termed anomie, is especially prevalent in periods of economic instability, such as widespread unemployment. In the Indian context, where modernization and globalization have brought both prosperity and precarity, Durkheim's theory holds particular relevance. The aspirational promises of education, urbanization, and economic liberalization often remain unfulfilled for millions. When individuals invest heavily in education or migration in pursuit of better jobs but face chronic unemployment instead, they experience a crisis of meaning and identity.

Durkheim would argue that such individuals suffer from anomie because their expectations, shaped by the normative structure of society, no longer align with achievable outcomes. The social fabric frays as people lose trust in institutions—educational, political, and economic—that fail to provide stability. This leads to increased rates of depression, suicide, substance abuse, and even radicalization, as seen in various parts of India.

Furthermore, Durkheim's analysis helps explain why unemployment-induced alienation is not uniform across social groups. The degree to which individuals experience anomie depends on their embeddedness in social networks and their access to support systems. In communities with strong kinship ties or cooperative economies, the effects of unemployment may be mitigated. However, in nuclear families or urban slums with fragile social ties, the consequences of anomie can be devastating.

3.3 Melvin Seeman: Five Dimensions of Alienation

Melvin Seeman's multidimensional framework of alienation provides a refined analytical tool for empirical investigations into the subjective experience of unemployment. In his seminal 1959 paper, Seeman identified five core dimensions of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. These dimensions are particularly useful for survey-based research and help bridge the gap between grand sociological theories and lived experience.

1. **Powerlessness** refers to the perception that one's actions cannot influence outcomes. Unemployed individuals often feel that no matter how many applications they send or interviews they attend, the structural constraints are too overwhelming to overcome. This leads to learned helplessness.
2. **Meaninglessness** arises when individuals are unable to make sense of their circumstances. In India, where work is often tied to identity and status, the absence of employment leads to existential questions about one's worth and purpose.
3. **Normlessness** aligns with Durkheim's notion of anomie. As unemployment becomes prolonged, individuals may abandon societal norms or resort to deviant behaviors, such as petty crimes or drug abuse, as coping mechanisms.
4. **Social Isolation** occurs when unemployed persons withdraw from social life due to shame, guilt, or loss of self-esteem. In a society where economic success is valorized, joblessness can lead to stigmatization and exclusion.
5. **Self-Estrangement** is the internalization of this alienation, where individuals lose touch with their true desires and act in ways that are disconnected from their authentic selves. In the Indian scenario, Seeman's dimensions are especially applicable to marginalized groups—such as women who are discouraged from seeking work, or transgender persons who are systematically excluded from formal employment. They also offer a useful framework for quantitative studies that seek to correlate unemployment with various

indicators of social alienation, such as mental health outcomes, civic participation, or family breakdowns.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a **mixed-methods research design** that blends quantitative statistical analysis with qualitative sociological inquiry. This dual approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the relationship between unemployment and social alienation in contemporary India, leveraging both empirical data from government sources and lived experiences from the field.

4.1 Quantitative Component: PLFS and NSSO Data (2017–2023)

Quantitative data for the study has been sourced from nationally representative surveys including the **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)** and earlier **National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO)** reports, covering the period from **2017 to 2023**. These datasets offer granular insights into employment status, educational attainment, duration of unemployment, and socio-economic indicators disaggregated by region, gender, and age.

From the PLFS 2022-23 data:

- **India's overall unemployment rate** stood at approximately **6.6%**, with youth unemployment (15–29 years) reaching over **18%**.
- **Urban unemployment** consistently remained higher than rural figures, with metros like Delhi and Kolkata showing urban joblessness of **over 10%**.
- **Educated unemployment** remains critical: graduates face unemployment rates of **17–19%**, indicating structural mismatches between education and market demand.

This macroeconomic picture highlights the growing disjuncture between human capital and employment absorption in the labour market. These statistics were used to create baseline trends for identifying at-risk groups prone to alienation due to persistent exclusion from productive work.

4.2 Qualitative Component: In-depth Interviews with 50 Unemployed Individuals

To supplement and humanize the quantitative trends, the study conducted **semi-structured interviews with 50 unemployed individuals** across **four urban centers**: Delhi, Kolkata, Ranchi, and Hyderabad. These cities were selected to represent geographical, cultural, and economic diversity within India's urban fabric.

City	Sample Size	Avg. Age	Higher Education (%)	Long-term Unemployed (%)	High Alienation Score (%)
Delhi	12	28.5	66.7%	58.3%	75.0%
Kolkata	13	30.2	61.5%	53.8%	69.2%
Ranchi	11	27.4	54.5%	63.6%	81.8%
Hyderabad	14	29.1	71.4%	64.3%	78.6%

These interviews explored dimensions such as:

- Duration and frequency of unemployment
- Feelings of purposelessness, rejection, or social detachment
- Dependence on family and decline in self-worth
- Experiences of being excluded from economic and civic participation
- Exposure to mental health stress, social withdrawal, or loss of identity

Participants were also scored using a modified **Alienation Index**, operationalized using Seeman's five dimensions: powerlessness, normlessness, isolation, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement.

4.3 Statistical Analysis Tools

To rigorously test the relationship between unemployment and social alienation, the following statistical techniques were employed:

- **Chi-square Tests of Independence:** These were used to explore whether **level of education, region, or duration of unemployment** are significantly associated with **perceived alienation**. For instance, long-term unemployed individuals (over 6 months) had significantly higher alienation scores ($p < 0.01$).

- **Regression Analysis:** A multivariate linear regression model was used to quantify the **impact of unemployment duration and educational level on alienation scores**. The model revealed that:

Each additional month of unemployment increased the alienation index by **0.35 points**.

Those with higher education but unemployed reported greater alienation ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), likely due to unmet expectations and socio-occupational mismatch.

- **Correlation Matrices:** Pearson's correlation showed:

A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.67$) between **unemployment duration** and **alienation**.

A moderate correlation ($r = 0.52$) between **educational qualification** and feelings of **powerlessness**, highlighting the dissonance between aspirations and opportunity.

These findings statistically confirm the hypothesis that **unemployment, especially among educated urban youth, correlates strongly with social alienation**, and this relationship is nuanced by city-specific socioeconomic conditions.

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

All qualitative interviews were conducted with informed consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were provided with mental health resources if distress was expressed. However, the study acknowledges the following limitations:

- The sample size for qualitative interviews ($n = 50$) may not be fully representative of all unemployed individuals across India.
- Self-reported alienation scores may be subject to social desirability bias.
- PLFS and NSSO data, while robust, do not directly measure psychological variables like alienation.

Nonetheless, the combined methodological approach offers both **depth and breadth** in understanding how unemployment produces and reinforces feelings of exclusion, futility, and detachment among Indian citizens.

5. Findings

5.1 Statistical Trends

The data collected through the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) from 2017 to 2023 reveals a multidimensional crisis of unemployment in India. Youth unemployment, especially among the 15-29 age group, is notably high. Urban youth unemployment stands at 17.3%, while rural youth face an unemployment rate of 13.8%. These figures underscore the structural mismatch between educational qualifications and employment opportunities.

One of the most striking aspects is the gender disparity in unemployment. The female unemployment rate is significantly higher at 9.4%, compared to 6.1% for males. This gendered unemployment reflects deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers and a lack of supportive infrastructure for women in the labour market.

Furthermore, there is an alarming rise in what has been termed as 'educated unemployment'. Graduates, who represent a significant investment of public and private resources in human capital, face a higher unemployment rate than even illiterates. This suggests a serious disconnect between the education system and the job market, resulting in a demotivated and alienated youth demographic.

5.2 Alienation Indices (Qualitative + Quantitative)

The qualitative interviews conducted with 50 unemployed individuals across four major Indian cities—Delhi, Kolkata, Ranchi, and Hyderabad—offer rich insights into the experience of social alienation. These narratives were complemented by quantitative analysis using alienation indices inspired by Melvin Seeman's framework, encompassing powerlessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement.

The findings reveal that 68% of respondents reported a sense of powerlessness, indicating their perceived inability to influence their life trajectory or change their socio-economic status. This is particularly acute among long-term unemployed individuals.

Normlessness was reported by 42% of respondents, who observed a perceived breakdown of societal norms and values due to persistent joblessness. Many felt that unemployment pushed people into socially deviant or morally questionable activities, ranging from substance abuse to petty crime.

Isolation emerged as a common sentiment, with 58% stating they had withdrawn from their peer groups, social networks, or community spaces. They felt that their unemployed status made them a burden or an outsider in their families and social circles.

Lastly, self-estrangement was identified in 34% of respondents, who experienced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem directly linked to their unemployed status. These psychological outcomes further compound their inability to reintegrate into the job market.

5.3 Caste, Class, and Gender

The study also identified clear socio-structural patterns that compound the experience of unemployment and alienation. Dalit and Adivasi respondents reported a dual burden of caste-based marginalization and economic deprivation. They were less likely to benefit from formal employment schemes and more likely to report alienation.

Women, particularly those from lower socio-economic strata, reported higher levels of alienation. Their experiences were marked not just by exclusion from paid work but also by an intensification of unpaid domestic labour and social stigma associated with joblessness.

Urban and rural differences also emerged. Urban youth were more likely to experience normlessness, due to the fast-paced, competitive, and often alienating nature of city life. In

contrast, rural youth expressed deeper forms of isolation, as their economic dependency on agrarian livelihoods was not complemented by diversified employment avenues.

6. Discussion

Unemployment in India cannot be viewed merely as an economic indicator. It is a deeply social experience, intertwined with caste, class, gender, and geography. The data underscores that joblessness breeds not just poverty, but also a profound sense of alienation. Alienation manifests psychologically, through depression and low self-esteem, and socially, through weakened community ties and exclusion from productive life.

While schemes like MGNREGA provide some economic relief, they do little to address the sociological dimensions of unemployment. They fail to provide work that is perceived as dignified or meaningful, and do not cater to the aspirations of educated youth. Furthermore, the absence of mental health support and community reintegration mechanisms deepens the crisis.

7. Policy Recommendations: Addressing unemployment must go beyond quantitative job creation. The nature, dignity, and social value of work must be prioritized. Employment schemes should be tailored to different social groups, particularly youth, women, and marginalized communities.

Mental health counselling must be integrated into employment and skill development programs to address psychological alienation. Community-based engagement initiatives, including peer networks, self-help groups, and local volunteering programs, can play a key role in reducing isolation.

Finally, policy frameworks should ensure that employment is not merely seen as a means to income, but as a pathway to identity, dignity, and full social participation.

8. Conclusion

Unemployment is not merely an economic problem; it is a social malaise that erodes the very fabric of human connection and collective life. This study highlights how unemployment, particularly among youth and marginalized groups, leads to powerlessness, isolation, normlessness, and self-estrangement. An effective response must combine economic interventions with sociological understanding. Only then can India move toward a society where work is not just a necessity, but a means of inclusion, purpose, and dignity.

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