

# Between Aspiration & Despair



## Government Jobs & the Predicament of the Educated Unemployed

A study by Centre for Equity Studies



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## Government Jobs & The Predicament of The Educated Unemployed

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### Introduction

As researchers in the Centre for Equity Studies, we have been grappling with the question of the lack of job creation in the India economy over the last few years. The crisis in the job market is no secret anymore. Despite the present government's efforts to withhold or distort official data, a recent 'leaked' report from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) claimed that the unemployment rate in India has touched a 45-year high of 6.1 per cent in 2017-18. The Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy (CMIE) estimated that the Indian economy lost 11 million jobs during 2018, and pegs the unemployment rate at 7.5% as on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2019. From the 5<sup>th</sup> Labour Bureau Employment Unemployment Survey (2015-16), we know that the unemployment rate among those with qualification of graduation and above was at an alarming 28.2% (as per usual status).<sup>2</sup> Among youth at large (15-29 year olds), it told a story of double digit unemployment.

It was to better understand the experience, investment (of time and money) and expectations of the educated unemployed jostling for jobs that we chose the "competitors"<sup>3</sup> as our subjects. While data on vacancies in government departments is still possible to come by (recent reports indicate that vacancies in central government positions alone run up to 24 lakh!), there is hardly any empirical data on the vast pool of those who seek these jobs. By focussing on this group in particular, we sought to further our understanding of the jobs crisis. Two key factors animate the context within which we locate the group under study:

### 1. Lack of job creation in the Indian economy

Employment elasticity (a commonly used indicator that measures how employment growth responds to GDP growth) in the last 15 years has hovered around the 0.1. This means for every 1% increase in the sum total of good and services produced, employment increases by only 0.1%. This nowhere near



Layers of such posters cover any available surface near tea stalls, juice parlours or stationary shops in coaching hubs. This is representative of the same in Jaipur.

<sup>1</sup> Both authors are Senior Researchers in the [Sankaran Unit for Research on Exclusion & Inequality](#) in the [Centre for Equity Studies](#). We are grateful for the support we received from our colleagues in CES particularly Nandini Dey who supported us on field. We acknowledge the support we received from Vikas, Sandeep and Richa Singh in Allahabad; Ira Bose and Subhash in Jaipur; Gobind, Rajat and Anupam from *Yuva Halla Bol* team; and from Adil Khan, Amrina Siddika, Fatima Banoo, Saba Khatoon, Shumaila, Sonali Singh, Srilakshmi Nambiar, Tanuj Luthra, Tanya Goel, and Varna Balakrishnan in Delhi. We also acknowledge the support of Kinjal Sampat in designing the survey questionnaire and finally our respondents for their patience and cooperation. Respondents' names have been changed in the report as we spoke to them on conditions of anonymity. In some places, however, we have used actual names as we had the consent to do so.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of these numbers and more, please see (Nath, 2019)

<sup>3</sup> We use this term to refer to those educated youths who spend years preparing for competitive tests through which government vacancies are filled.

matches the number of those joining the workforce every passing year. Analysts estimate about 6-7 million people join the workforce every year (estimates based on 2011-2016 period).<sup>4</sup> Whereas job creation in the formal economy has been to the tune of 0.7 million per annum. A steady decline in the workforce participation rate over the last decade indicates that a smaller proportion of people are looking for work. This is a most worrying trend that shakes all belief in India's growth story as far as common people are concerned. It indicates a dip in perception about the job prospects in the economy. The shock of demonitisation, according to the CMIE<sup>5</sup> (our only source of large scale data, given official data has been withheld), caused the already low Labour Force Participation Rate to fall from 47% to 45%! Worryingly, there haven't been strong signs of recovery ever since.

## 2. A shrinking state sector

There has been a reduction in government employment in the last 15 years. Alongside a reduction in overall strength, the significant trend as far as the formal segment of the workforce is concerned has been increasing informalisation. That is to say, more and more jobs within the organised, formal sector are being informalised. From 1999-00 to 2011-12, the share of informal workers in the organised sector rose from 32% to 67%.<sup>6</sup> Secure, formal employment in Central Public Services fell from 16.1 lakh in 2006-7 to 11.3 lakh in 2016-17. Similarly, secure, formal employment in the Railways (single biggest employer) reduced from 13.97 lakh to 13.08 lakh over the same period. The story is similar for government banks where total employment reduced from 9.7 lakh in 2012-13 to 9.1 lakh in 2016-17. These empirical trends are in keeping with the neoliberal economic policies of both, the BJP and the Congress. In their bid to curb government expenditure, they have effectively contributed to reducing secure employment opportunities, particularly in government jobs. These policy decisions are backed by ideological arguments that government employees are corrupt, inefficient and a burden on the citizenry. The factual basis of this claim notwithstanding, we show through our findings below, that there is no consensus on this point and represents a minority middle class perspective.

Given this context of a jobs crisis and reduction in formal employment, the group of "competitors" represents a particularly important social location – they are educated people who are making a conscious decision to stay out of the workforce with the hope of landing a secure yet elusive government job. Anecdotally we know that the number of such people in our cities is huge. Entire localities are populated by and local economies sustained by the *competitors*. Yet, we know next to nothing about their numbers, their social and economic composition, their reasons to opt for this route of searching for employment and what they think of the job prospects in the Indian economy. We consider it important to look at the labour market through their perspective and to understand the experiences that shapes the same.

With this aim, we decided to conduct a field survey coupled with qualitative interviews and group discussions in three cities that have a sizeable population of *competitors* – Delhi, Jaipur and Allahabad. Our total sample strength of 515 is divided into 317 (Delhi), 132 (Jaipur) and 66 (Allahabad). The smaller samples in Jaipur and Allahabad are owing to the lack of time and resources, but provide comparative insights on the situation. In what follows we describe our findings in a narrative form, with the statistical findings of our survey presented at the end in the form of an annexure. The first section speaks of the sheer desperation that competitors have been pushed into in recent years in a climate of shrinking opportunities and uncertainties. The next section attempts to unravel as to why

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<sup>4</sup> On this, see (Dewan, 2018)

<sup>5</sup> See (Vyas, 2019)

<sup>6</sup> See (Mehrotra, Parida, Sinha, & Gandhi, 2014)

despite the above uncertainties do a section of the educated unemployed still stake so much for an elusive government job? Section three speaks of the myriad social/class barriers that they have to grapple with as they stake the prime of their youth in what is certainly not a level playing ground. Section four attempts to get a glimpse of the eco-system of a coaching hub – the coaching centres, the classrooms, the reading rooms, lodges and so on – an entire industry that thrives on the aspirations and despair of the educated unemployed. Finally, the last section concludes with the gross irregularities that have marred the selection process particularly in the last few years – which is the hallmark of a systemic crisis, that of joblessness.

I

**“Competitors” can’t be choosers.**

*“Unlike about a decade ago, what seems to have been established in recent years is the desperation amongst aspirants to apply and settle for any job whatsoever.”*

- Interview with Rajiv Sir at a coaching institute in Allahabad

Ganesh has recently started tutoring as a part time profession in Jaipur. He is a competitor since the last seven years. Echoing the sense of urgency conveyed routinely by our respondents, he says, “At the outset applicants dream of being an inspector, but with time one finds oneself applying for every possible post, even that of a peon or a Group D position.” A 19 year old applicant learning computer efficiency in a coaching institute in Jaipur told us that these days, “it doesn’t matter *which job* or *what grade*. What matters is *how fast*.”

The average number of years spent preparing for competitive exams as reported in our survey is 3 years and 3 months. Our qualitative findings suggest that this number hugely under-represents the time usually invested by those vying for government jobs. The reason for this being that our survey sample was taken from outside coaching centres, while those who have been preparing for longer usually retire to distant neighbourhoods for self-study after a year or two of coaching. We also found that this is more so the case in smaller towns as the cost of living is lower than metropolises like Delhi. Remarking on the journey of a competitor, Ganesh claims, “The *josh* or enthusiasm of the early years plummets with cumulative years of failures.” Our analysis of the estimates respondents gave when we asked them ‘how many years preparation takes’ indicates a rising trend as we move from lower to higher age groups, thus backing Ganesh’s claim. From an average of 2 years and 10 months reported by those under 20 we see a steady increase to 3 years and 7 months for those above 28 years of age. This trend was seen to be particularly sharp for Allahabad (see figure 3 below), indicating perhaps that the struggle for a government job is much longer in the experience of those in smaller towns.



Posters notifying Application forms for various openings and admissions that are a common sight in the coaching hubs like Katra, Allahabad.

As the copies of *pratiyogita darpan* pile up on the shelves, so does the desperation of the competitors. Being reliant on their families for years without the certainty of success at the end of years of preparations can have a strong demoralising impact on the individual. Overwhelmingly those preparing for competitive exams remain unemployed through the course of their preparation. 93% of

our survey respondents were unemployed at the time of preparation. Almost all of them have to depend entirely on their families for financial support. Tellingly, one of our respondents expressed that mental health is a serious concern among competitors that ought to be addressed as they suffer from depression in struggling with the uncertainties of their future. He recommended that there should be professional counsellors attached to the coaching institutes.

With a reduction in the number of vacancies being announced and gross irregularities in the examination and selection process in recent years, the situation today, said one respondent in Jaipur, is such that applicants, particularly those coming from difficult background, are under pressure from their families to take up any job on any grade that comes their way. The same was attested by Rajiv Sir in Allahabad, who spared half an hour for us in between two batches in an otherwise packed schedule from 7 in the morning till 8 in the evening. He said the desperation escalated from 2017-18 on the back of the infamous SSC case (see below) and an intensifying jobs crisis in the economy. Overqualified applicants making omnibus attempts on all posts possible as a phenomenon has gained prominence in recent years, he said.

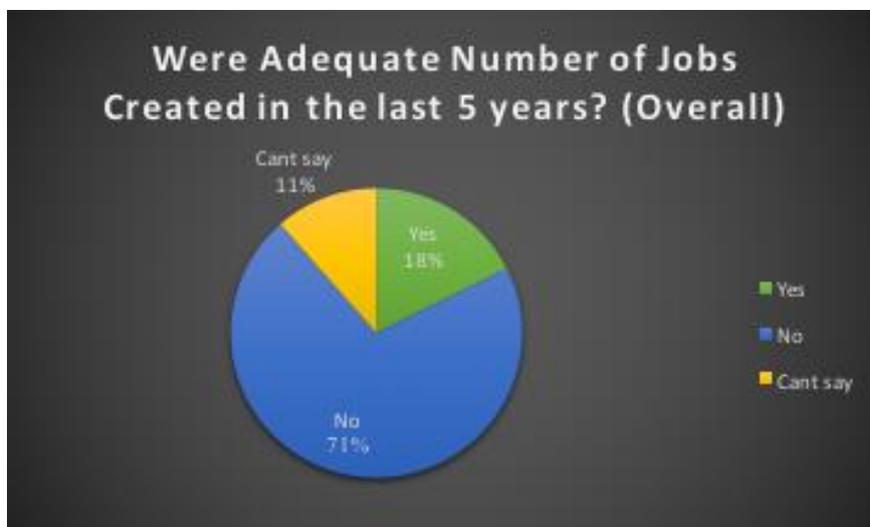


Figure 1: Were adequate number of jobs created in the last five years?

Rajiv teaches in a coaching institute that has an overall enrolment of 4000 students. The institute is housed in a two storey complex with the building's small corridors opening into vast halls crammed with benches. A room carved out in the middle of the lobby using plastic partitions serves as the teachers' room. At 11am, as the present class ends, a crowd forms at the entrance as the next batch lines up to fill up the rooms in the complex. Rajiv tells us 5-6 years back about 200 students would land jobs at the end of a year on average. The 5% rate of success was a healthy one according to him. It has currently plummeted to about 50-60 students getting employment at the end of the year, bringing the success rate down to about 1-1.5%. "There are students whom I myself have been teaching for the third or the fourth time", says Rajiv, "and at any point in time 70% of the class are roll over students". Rajiv completed his MSc from Allahabad University and was a competitor himself not very long ago. He got selected as an inspector and was undergoing training for his job when he realised this was not his calling. He tells of more qualified candidates than him who were his batch mates in the training. They were all there not because they wanted to do the job required of an inspector, but because this was the best form of employment they could secure.

Speaking of the change over the last decade he says, "Our generation started preparation only after graduation as BA/BSc serves as a foundation that is a precondition for any candidate to make an

informed choice. But now students are starting preparations right after their high school while pursuing BA.” Indeed, we met a 17 year old who had finished his 12<sup>th</sup> standard exams and taken a train and arrived in Allahabad. Asked what he’d like to do, he didn’t have an answer, save for *taiyyari*.

## II

### **Why sarkari naukri?**

*“Company can close any day...aaj hai kal nahi...”*

A number of our respondents had in the past worked in private firms. These were often first jobs and it is telling that their experiences bore a similarity that resonated in the themes they chose to elaborate upon. Those who hadn’t themselves worked, held views similar to the ones voiced by those with work experience in the private sector. This was owing to perceptions formed on the basis of experience of others close to them – someone in their family or friends who had worked in a private sector company. For some people, the distinction comes from having seen their family members or close relatives work in the public sector. Following were the reasons reported by respondents across Jaipur and Allahabad for competing for government jobs in comparison to taking up work in privately owned companies:

#### ***Long hours, less pay...***

The respondents we met who had worked in the private sector in the past, were critical of the levels of exploitation or working conditions, if not both. Contrasting the image of corporate India that we see ever so often in media reportage, of glass towers and men in suits, our respondents spoke about long train journeys and poor wages. “After completing a Diploma from ITI, Sultanpur, I went off to Chennai to work in a plastics plant. There were 20-25 of us who went together”, said Kishore in Allahabad. “Once there, we found the conditions to be vastly different than what we were told. We were required to put in 12 hour shifts for too less a salary.” All but the most hard pressed (*majboor*) ones left in a week. Now Kishore feels his three years of Diploma was a “waste”. It was good enough only to fetch him a sub-human job. Hence he started *taiyaari* for *sarkari naukri*. Sandeep echoed the same concerns that made him give up his earlier job. Having finished his M.Comm, he had joined a plant of the Adanis in Ambikapur, Chhattisgarh as an Assistant Accountant. After 13-hour shifts he had to travel 22 kms for a paltry salary. Being handed down excessive briefs from all his superiors, he felt ill treated at work and decided to leave in a month’s time. He has been preparing ever since for a government job.

#### ***There is izzat (dignity) in sarkari naukri (public sector)...***

Widely reported by almost everyone we spoke to was the concern with dignity or *izzat* that is attached to government jobs. This is one of the strongest positive reason that makes the *elusive sarkari naukri* so coveted. Conversely, the lack of respect at the job was a feature reported by many in their experience of working in private firms.

Once secured, a government job instantly enhances the social status of not just the candidate, but of the whole immediate family. It remains one of the guarantees of social mobility, especially for those coming from rural, and particularly, lower caste backgrounds. One of the indicators of the enhanced social status, pointed an applicant who was keen to acknowledge the conservativeness of the example, was the instant inflation in one’s dowry evaluation.

## Popular perception: inefficient and corrupt?

Middle class perception of government employees, especially those holding lower and middle rung positions, is that they are mostly inefficient and corrupt. One of the characteristics of the post-liberalisation period is the ideological rendering of the public sector as an unnecessarily large, unproductive laggard. We decided to test these views with our respondents who gave some unapologetic arguments, backed by examples that were hard to argue against.

Preparing for his SSC exams in Allahabad, Ramesh is enrolled in an MA degree course at Allahabad University. Coming from a scheduled caste background, his mother is an *anganwadi worker*. He says the creation of this kind of an impression (referred to above) about the public sector is part of a *saajish*, a conspiracy.. “My mother is an anganwadi worker. Along with the arduous tasks associated with being an anganwadi worker – teaching, child care, home visits and maintaining 12 full data registers, she has to double up for roles ranging from a BLO at polling booths to administering Polio vaccine to census works and so on. How are all of these managed at such a scale with no efficiency as is alleged?” Similarly, he added, a primary school teacher is expected to not just teach the children, but also manage proper conduct of the voting exercise, count livestock and so on. Government employees, according to Ramesh, are overburdened and yet perform essential duties.

Countering the claim that the public sector is ridden with corruption, Shankar, who has been doing his *taiyaari* for about five years now, says it exists in the private sector as well. He said that as far as corruption is concerned, there is no denying that it exists in government sector, but so it does in a big if not bigger scale, in the private sector as well. “Only that”, he said, “in the latter sector, it stays carefully hidden, whereas in the former it becomes an issue.” An ST candidate, Shankar has been staying on rent in a shared accommodation in Jaipur. The problem, he says is that “today public opinion is being framed by only a few voices of the urban middle class through the media.” “If you ask people in villages, they will largely be anti-privatisation. 90% of them will tell you they want more government officials. They want and need more of the state sector.” This view is reflected across the cities in terms of the largely negative perception of our respondents vis-à-vis privatization as a “solution” to the prevailing job crisis. Instead, a fairly large share of them consider the filling up of vacancies and further expansion of state jobs as the way forward (See Figure 2). An even higher preference is given to programmes and legal entitlements like the Urban job guarantee programme (employment at minimum wages at government departments in cities with a skill building component) and ideas like employment guarantee for graduates (assured employment options for graduates failing which one would be entitled to an unemployment allowance).



Highlighting the fundamental role of public services, another competitor in Jaipur, Jeevan astutely pointed out that “at the end of the day, the private sector wouldn’t really be able to operate if the

public sector was not functional.” Identifying the differential access to various types of social capital, he suggested that access to good quality, high paying jobs in the private sector were shut off to candidates like him. Those, he said, “get settled through *jaan pehchaan* (social networks) ...” and asked, “Isn’t that also corruption?” Speaking about candidates like him, who come from rural backgrounds with educational training from mofussil towns, he summed up the situation thus, “There are two types of jobs in the private sector, the high paying ones which are closed off to us, and the low paying, highly exploitative ones where you work 12 hours for 10,000 rupees without any job security. Those are the only ones we can get in the private sector.”

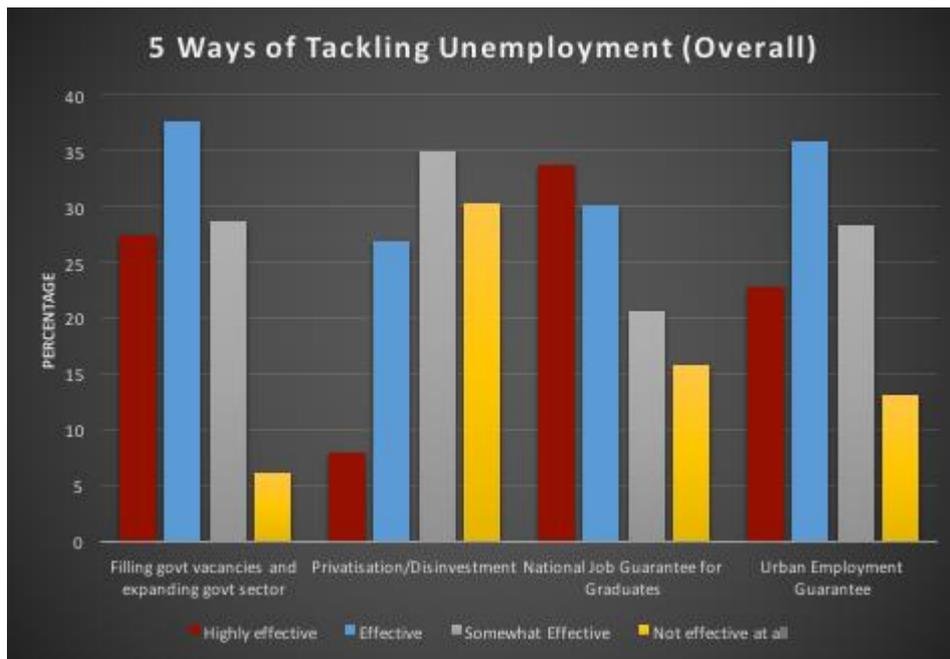


Figure 2: Means of tackling unemployment

Acknowledging that this has been an older trend, respondents we spoke to often rebuked the current government particularly sharply. “Under the present government, even the vacancies that were there to be filled-in have been slashed”, said one respondent. He believes that such moves are directed by the motive of imposing the model of privatization, which the present government is committed to. Varun, an SC aspirant in Delhi, was apprehensive that such moves would prove detrimental to the interests of social justice and inclusion. Still, in public perception, the extent of the crisis, said Shankar, gets buried under the avalanche of divisive and communal propaganda shown in the media night and day.

As far as “self-employment” is concerned, around which there has been heightened discourse under the present government, the response of those we interviewed ranged from being sceptical to dismissive. “No matter what they may say (on MUDRA loans), no bank wants to give loans to the unemployed. I myself have visited my bank thrice and all three times the manager has denied my eligibility under any such scheme,” said Jeevan. Pointing to the uncertainties businesses face and the differential treatment meted out by the government, he said, “Any business, big or small, can always fail or run into losses ... but unlike in the case of the Nirav Modis, would the government pull us through the losses we may suffer?”



Competitors in Allahabad largely come from the rural hinterland and from agrarian background hoping to tide over their relative disadvantages. Above are aspirants in a coaching centre in Allahabad.

### III

#### Encountering Disadvantages

The survey exercise was not primarily geared towards exploring the role played by socio-economic criteria in influencing the choices and decisions of competitors. However, since we did collect basic data on social and economic background of candidates and these aspects featured prominently in our qualitative interviews, we do have some indicative observations and data findings on particular themes which we discuss below.

##### **Was your previous educational training helpful?**

One of the questions we asked checked the perception of respondents about the usefulness of their previous educational training for the purpose of preparing for competitive exams. Almost 2/5<sup>th</sup> of our sample responded by giving a negative valuation, while only 8% deemed their educational training thus far to have been very helpful in preparing for their competitive exams. At this point it is worthwhile to remind ourselves that we are talking about a group in which 91% of people are either graduates or postgraduates. The negative valuation of educational training is a stark, but perhaps unsurprising indictment of our education system.

Further, from our qualitative interviews we repeatedly note the emphasis respondents belonging to rural areas, who have completed their education in Hindi, place on the extra amount of time and effort it takes them to be at par with those who have benefitted from the opportunities available in urban areas. The valuation of usefulness of education reduces from an overall average of 2.81 (out of 5) to 2.76 for those who belong to rural areas and have studied in Hindi. Further, we notice that it drops to 2.48 if we look only at the subset who completed their highest degrees from state government run institutes (i.e. Rural + Hindi + State Government run Institution).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to emphasise that these figures are only indicative and a trend cannot be established based on the same. To do so would require a more detailed investigation into what factors people consider when they rate the usefulness of their educational training.

### Compounding disadvantages: Rural background and Hindi education

65% of our respondents reported as hailing from rural backgrounds and 66% reported having last attended a government run educational institute (See Appendix). 40% of our respondents reported Hindi as the language of instruction in their educational training. It is interesting to notice the distribution of this (Hindi educated) group across the cities we surveyed. The figures are diametrically opposite when one compares Delhi and Allahabad. 80% of the respondents in Delhi reported English while 86% reported Hindi as their language of educational instruction in Allahabad (Figure 6, Appendix).

The recurrent emphasis on the relative disadvantage faced by those belonging to rural areas was articulated by Sachin in Allahabad. He maintained that the gap is created very early on in schooling. Those who cannot afford to take private schooling or are compelled to rely on public schools in rural areas, which are ill equipped to provide quality education lost out. These disadvantages account for a couple of years worth of the competitors time, said Sachin. Pradeep and Gokul concurred. When they come to the city, they come with high hopes. But soon they come to terms with their disadvantages. “We take about six months to settle down here after coming from our villages. Then begins the search for suitable coaching centres. After a year’s coaching, we take to self study for another year. When we don’t get success, we take second coaching for another year and only by then we start clearing cut offs. Over all it takes at the least 5 to 7 years for us to struggle for a job... if vacancies are regular that is,” he said. It takes about 2 to 3 years for the candidate to adjust to the ways of learning and in finding out what jobs can be competed for. A group of students who we spoke to outside Allahabad University Central Library narrated similar stories and emphasised that a lack of orientation and information, coupled with the relative disadvantages they carry easily costs them 2 to 3 year in really getting started.

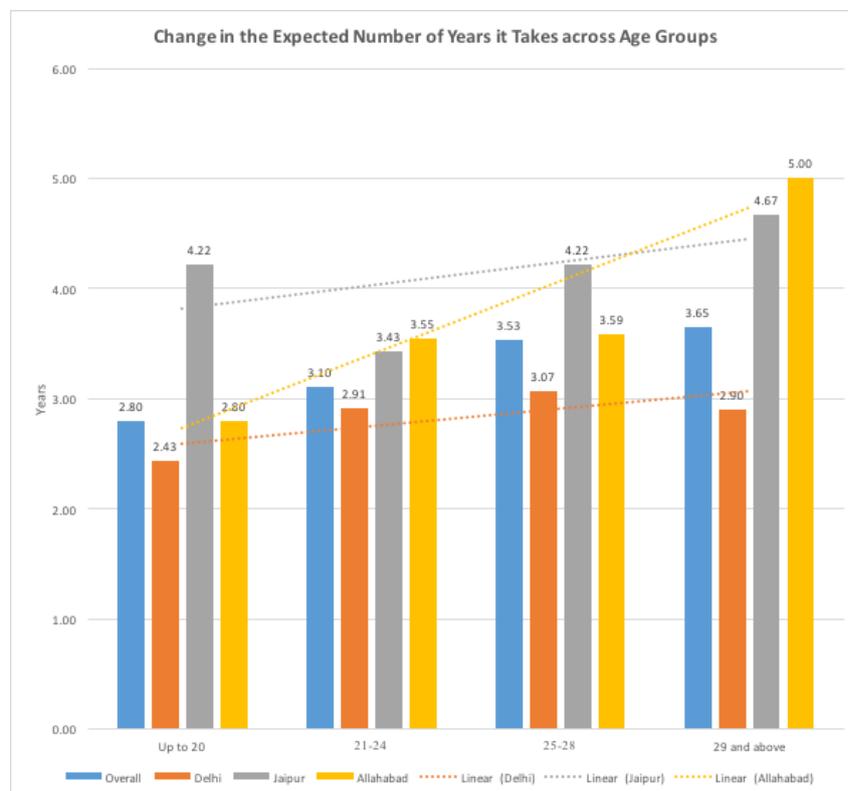


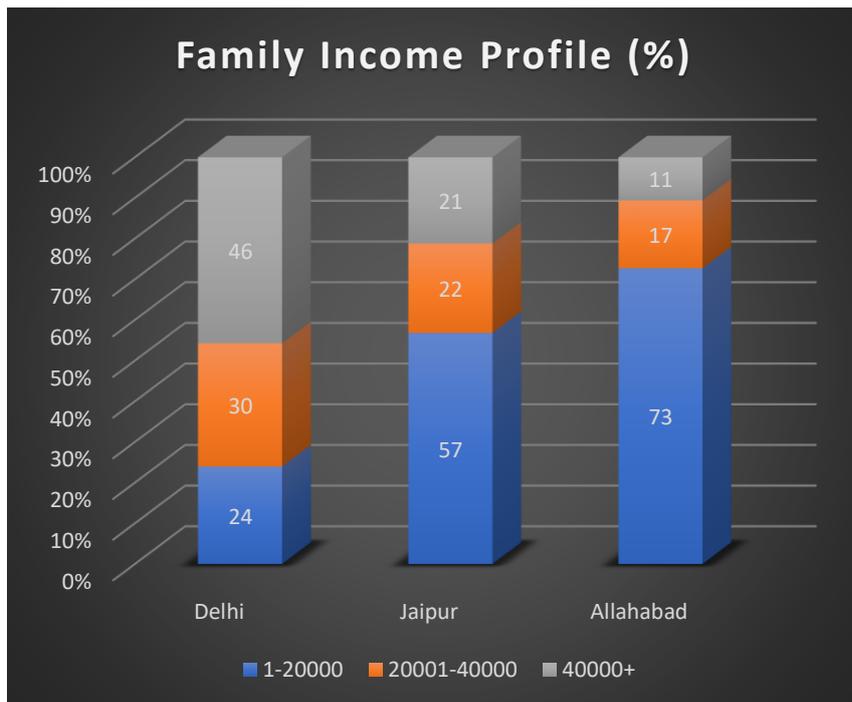
Figure 3: Change in the expected number of years it takes to get a job across age groups

## Class Matters

Rajiv sir (in Allahabad) added that competitors from rural background do not have the wherewithal to sustain themselves in Delhi for their *taiyaari*, they prefer Allahabad. Only those with relatively more money and “backing” (social capital) can afford to travel to Delhi. He estimates that in a place like Allahabad only 30-40% come from relatively better off backgrounds. The rest somehow make ends meet. “I understand their situation as I myself was in their shoes once. There were times in a month”, he said, “when I would dread if a friend would ask even for a cup of tea.” We ourselves witnessed students bargaining for a lower coaching fee in the institute we visited. Rajiv sir in fact said such negotiations are not unusual. This is corroborated by our survey data that shows the lowest proportion of rural applicants preparing in Delhi (50%) while the proportion reaches a whopping 87% in Jaipur and 92% in Allahabad (Figure 2, Appendix). The difference in average annual coaching fees across the three cities surveyed are stark – 11,449 in Allahabad compared to 21,040 in Jaipur and 65,351 in Delhi. The proportion of people preparing for higher end job exams, like the UPSC, are also higher in Delhi, as compared to the other two places. Renting accommodation (usually a shared room, see Box 1 below) in Allahabad on average costs a competitor 3,737 per month. In Jaipur, on average our respondents reported paying 4,677 rupees towards monthly rent. In Delhi however, our respondents reported a much higher amount at 6,638 rupees spent on renting accommodation every month (See Table 1). Overall annual expenditure per competitor, our survey shows, varies massively across the three cities. In Allahabad on average, a competitor spends 1,52,303 rupees in a year. Compared to this in Jaipur, the annual average expenditure of a competitor jumps 22% to 1,95,130 rupees. In Delhi, the reported annual average expenditure of a competitor is 2,97,168, nearly double of what one would be spending in Allahabad. (See Table 2) Figure 4 presents a picture of the class background of competitors in the three cities. In line with reported expenditures in the three cities, Figure 4 shows as one moves from the more expensive cities (based on reported expenditure above) in the order of Delhi-Jaipur-Allahabad, one sees a shift in the proportion of income groups that the respondents belong to. So one finds that the proportion of respondents belonging to the higher income group (monthly income of family = 40,000+) is highest in Delhi and lowest in Allahabad. As one moves down the income groups, the proportion decreases in Delhi and increases in both Jaipur and Allahabad, with the change being greater in the latter. The proportion of competitors belonging to the lower income group (monthly income of family  $\leq$ 20,000) are highest in Allahabad (at 73% compared to 57% in Jaipur and 24% in Delhi).



Hundreds fill each class room as an increasing number of graduates look for secure employment. Here is a classroom in a coaching centre in Allahabad.



**Figure 4: Distribution of Family Income Profiles of competitors across the three cities**

Can the deprived sections or those from oppressed castes within a village afford to send their wards away for years for preparation? Ramesh, an SC candidate, said that if jobs are adequate, vacancies are regular, and irregularities under check, i.e., if the probability of getting a job after a few years of efforts and investments is reasonable, then even the most disadvantaged sections will invest in sending their kids in pursuit of jobs. He told of instances where families in villages he knew had taken loans to pay for the *taiyaari* of their children because they had seen someone in the village get a job after preparing in Allahabad. But if the probability is low, the effect is negative as a high level of uncertainty is unaffordable. Our survey found that upper castes and the OBCs form the majority of the competitors. Delhi sees the highest proportion of upper castes (52% reported General), while OBCs form a sizeable chunk in Allahabad. SCs and STs constitute 9% and 8% respectively of the overall sample (Figure 3, Appendix)

Expenditure Summary - Delhi													
Expenditure Category	Monthly						Annual						
	Rent	Food	Library	City Travel	Other		Coaching	Educational Material	Medical	Travel for Exam	Exam Form	Other	Inter City Travel
No of respondents	241	234	134	270	214		235	305	151	231	262	107	208
Average Expense Reported	6,638	3,976	1,025	1,700	2,579		65,351	9,743	7,574	4,430	3,889	8,581	6,579

Expenditure Summary - Jaipur													
Expenditure Category	Monthly						Annual						
	Rent	Food	Library	City Travel	Other		Coaching	Educational Material	Medical	Travel for Exam	Exam Form	Other	Inter City Travel
No of respondents	116	117	113	130	105		125	126	117	130	130	75	103
Average Expense Reported	4,677	3,128	766	1,366	1,664		21,040	8,163	5,272	6,068	6,020	5,272	4,080

Expenditure Summary - Allahabad													
Expenditure Category	Monthly						Annual						
	Rent	Food	Library	City Travel	Other		Coaching	Educational Material	Medical	Travel for Exam	Exam Form	Other	Inter City Travel
No of respondents	62	62	22	62	30		65	64	52	62	66	24	59
Average Expense Reported	3,737	2,504	618	1,052	1,316		11,449	9,589	5,042	4,476	4,158	3,908	2,962

Table 1: Expenditure break-up across all three cities.

Overall Average Expense	
Delhi	2,97,168
Jaipur	1,95,130
Allahabad	1,52,303

Table 2: Overall annual expenses

## Fewer Women

Our sample was largely male dominated, with men outnumbering women 3:1 overall. In Delhi we met as many men as we did women, but in relatively smaller cities of Jaipur and Allahabad, the percentage of women respondents fell drastically to 13% and 8% respectively.

When asked to identify the biggest issue faced by a woman applicant as a competitor, a woman in a coaching centre in Jaipur said that the crucial factor is the support (or the lack of it) from family. In course of the preparation one is in need of both financial and moral support from family members, the presence or absence of which makes a crucial



This was one of the coaching centres in Allahabad. Women occupied not more than the first couple of rows of an average classroom.

difference. One of the women mentioned that she was married, but she came back to her natal home to do her preparations. She said that she was persisting with it despite the lack of support from her in-laws. Though one of the respondents mentioned that the number of women aspirants have increased, but even then in the coaching classes we had access to, the gender gap was stark.

### **Missing Muslims**

Share of Muslim respondents in the survey data amounted to a mere 4.66%. This low representation in competition for formal government jobs is consistent with the findings of the Sacchar Committee and its subsequent re-evaluation by the Kundu Committee in 2012. Despite forming about 14% of the population, the share of Muslims in government jobs is just 8.50%. In 2017, only about 5% of successful UPSC candidates were Muslim, and even this was an improvement from previous years. Discrimination, ghettoization, denial of opportunities and facilities, lack of affirmative actions – all may be responsible for the same. One major factor, more so in these times is of course prejudice. In one of the coaching classes in fact, when one of us happened to use a couple of Urdu words, one of the competitors sceptically asked if all of us (a group of 3 investigators) were Muslims.

### **Linkages with the farm economy**

37% of our respondents reported agriculture as the primary means of their family's income. However, once again a huge variation is observed when comparing respondents in Delhi (22%) with those from Jaipur, where 55% of the respondents came from farming families and Allahabad, where the figure is as high as 71% for those coming from farming families (See Figure 5). From our qualitative interviews in both Jaipur and Allahabad, we came to know that several of the competitors in fact went home at the time of harvest and sowing to work on the fields. We also found out that a large section of those with such a strong relation to farming brought grain and other produce with them for consumption in the city. This practice is routine in among competitors in Allahabad, where the proportion of those with farming backgrounds is highest. Bringing a sack or two of grain and potatoes from home helps them reduce living costs in the city, whereas their labour is much needed on the farm in peak season.

Agriculture also forms a large part of the worldview of competitors coming from farming backgrounds. Unlike their urban counterparts, even though they do not want to continue farming, agriculture as an industry figures prominently in their imagination. The respondents in Jaipur and Allahabad spoke at length about the crisis in agriculture, the rising input costs, the decreasing income from land and the lack of decent support prices. Speaking about the pressure their preparation puts on the family back home, one of the respondents in Jaipur comment on the problem of low returns. "Expenses do not wait for a time when prices may increase. Without a proper support price, the farmer has no option but to sell unfavourably... (in our case) they have to send us the money every month to sustain our preparation in the city. Where else can they manage? So they have to sell." Respondents in Allahabad told us that they do not always tell at home of their requirements in the city for fear of increasing the burden on their families. Even though our respondents do not see any future in *kheti* under present conditions, it is important to note that land nonetheless has an enormous value for them and they are strongly opposed to selling it. Land provides a refuge of last resort for many of our respondents. Not only does income from land, even under conditions of distress, economically sustain many of them in course of preparation, it acts like an economic safety net as well. "If nothing works out what will we do...", said Jeevan, "we will go back to our village and get into cultivation."

## Primary Source of Family Income (Overall)

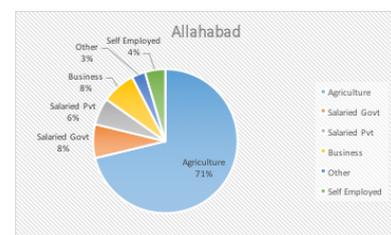
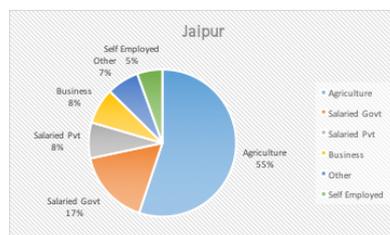
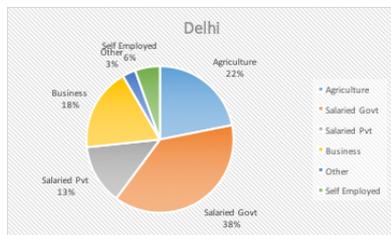
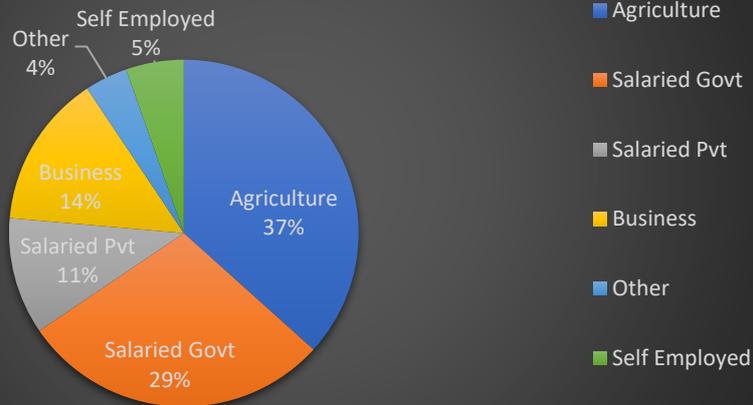


Figure 5: Primary Source of Family Income

## Number of years spent doing preparation (Overall)

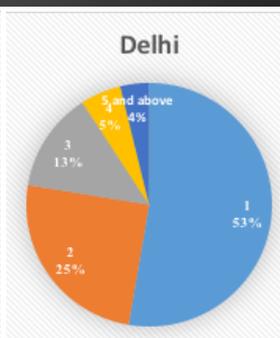
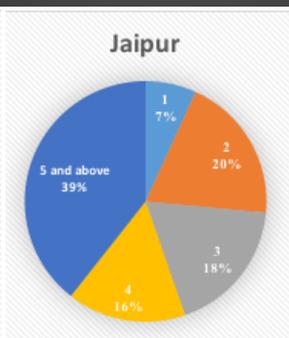
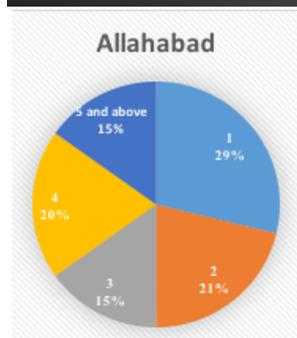
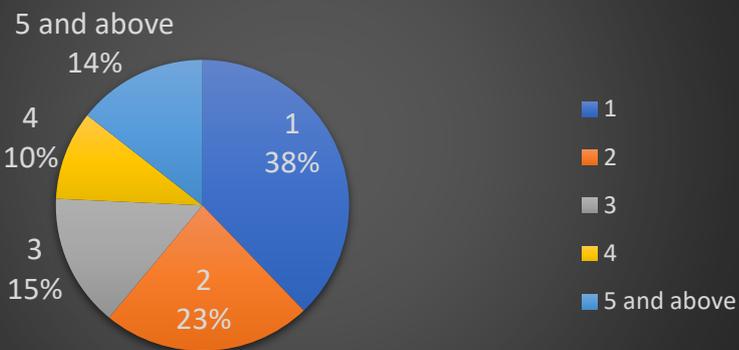


Figure 6: Number of years spent doing preparation

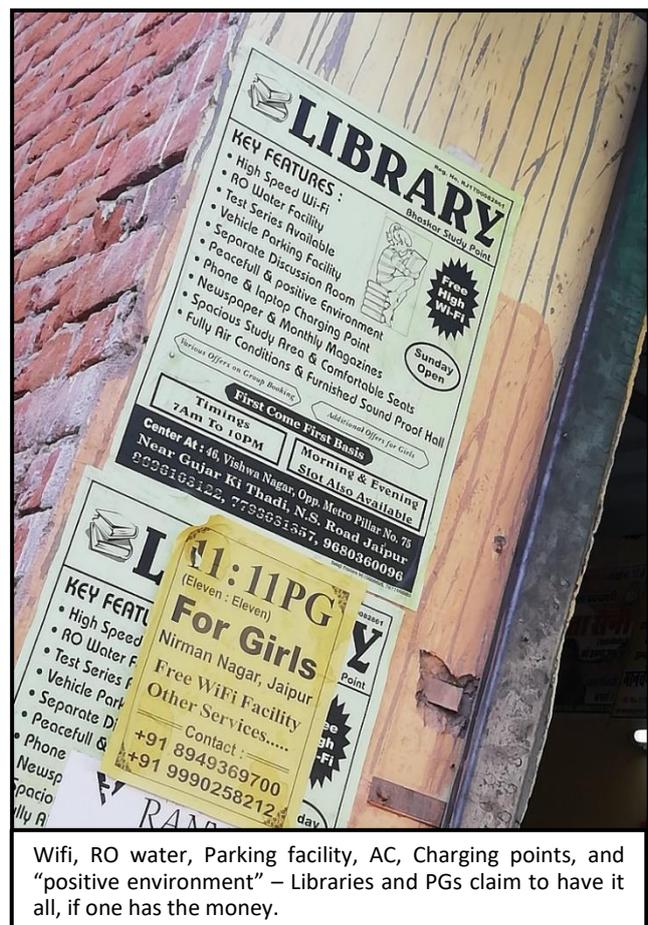
We asked our respondents how agriculture could be revived and they had some very straightforward answers to give. For them any move towards a resolution of the crisis had to start from the villages with securing the future of the farmers. From one of our group discussion, the following picture of a possible alternative emerged. Support measures in agriculture have to be combined with a push in rural based, agriculture related industries with the aim of increasing employment for those coming from farming backgrounds but moving out of the profession themselves. Rather than concentrating growth in cities, an expanding state sector in rural areas could achieve a lot in terms of growth with employment creation. There is in any case a huge demand for public services and it will be better delivered in a scenario where economic opportunities are also being created alongside in rural areas.

#### IV

### The Unemployment Industry

A stroll through the streets of the coaching hubs gives the impression of a market place where literally thousands of such centres have mushroomed. Depending on the scale of operations of the firm, batches can vary from a minimum of 20 and run up to 600 odd students sitting in massive halls (fitted with speakers/projectors). Web based tuitions, often through mobile phone applications are also common now, catering to thousands of competitors, creating sources of revenue for the well established coaching institutes.

Then there are reading rooms or libraries for self-study that form an integral part of the *mahaul*. The advanced ones boast of wifi, AC and water dispensers. Those availing such services in our survey report an average annual expense of 10,594 rupees. The reported average annual expense on coaching, reading rooms/libraries and study material taken together amounts to 63,990 rupees per year. When one takes into account all other expenses made in the local economy such as rent, food, local travel, etc., the total expense per candidate reaches an average of 2,82,270 in Delhi, 1,78,962 in Jaipur and 1,40,708 in Allahabad. These can be understood as indicative amounts for the amount of money brought by each competitor to the local economy of the place they prepare at. Rajiv Sir estimates the number of competitors in Allahabad alone to be about 1 million. Even if one takes the actual size as half of his estimate, the figure for the money spent by competitors annually in Allahabad would be huge. This





Teachers with microphones and projector screens address batches of hundreds in cramped halls that are fitted with speakers. A typical coaching centre in Allahabad.

money goes to sustain entire neighbourhoods, not to mention the coaching industry and consumption markets that grow alongside.

Pooran, whom we met in Jaipur was categorical. “The coaching centres are minting money”, he said, “Yet they are not registered and almost all of them are unlicensed. So, their malpractices go unaccounted.” We heard stories of how coaching institutes are in cahoots with government departments and lobby to delay examinations. In the months building up to exams for a particular vacancy, the prices of coaching courses specific to those exams see an increase.

Coaching institutes exist because they fill a void. Given the inadequacy of our educational system in training candidates (evidenced by the poor valuation given by

our respondents reported above), coaching institutes seek to fill in by providing theme specific training and practice. One may question the system that has led to the creation of such a large market for Coaching institutes. If our education system was performing better, perhaps the demand for Coaching would be far lesser. However, at present, they provide a service that is valued. This is more so the case in smaller cities like Allahabad, where the competitors start from a significant relative disadvantage and hence what they learn in coaching institutes is valued highly by many of them.

Vikas, however, claimed that even 15-20 years back, the coaching industry wasn’t as big as it is today as many, particularly those enrolled in the university, used to rely on self-study. This is because earlier the evaluation was more in tune with the general social science training of an university student. But with the shift towards a more technical syllabus, the criterion of evaluation has undergone a sea-change. More technical training has entailed that students have had to rely on professional training in coaching institutes. Better training means more payment. Institutes like Balaji or Bajirao take as high as one lakh as their annual fees. This serves to automatically weed out the chances of students from deprived backgrounds who cannot afford such costs.

There is a sense that prevails in several quarters that Coaching institutes as businesses benefit from an unjust situation. “I did not even know what a computer is while growing up”, said Tanmay from Neem ka Thaana in Rajasthan. We met him at a computer proficiency class in a coaching centre in Jaipur. The teacher was imparting basic computer training on a projector in a small class room, while behind them in an adjacent room were rows of desktops with the previous batch practicing on them. Tanmay pointed at a dialogue box on the screen that said “No Signal”. He said, “We didn’t even know what signal is?” Unlike the others in the group who lived in Jaipur who had computers at their homes, he, like many had to extend their time in coaching centres to practice typing and other basic functions in shifts in “the lab”. Just for practicing typing for two hours every day, they would be charged 1000



Projector, classroom, and computers. A typical coaching centre in Jaipur. The teacher here said that students in such centres are neatly divided into *conductors* (ones who can adapt and apply the knowledge that is imparted), *insulators* (ones who find it difficult to grasp) and *semi-conductors* (ones who need to be pushed and motivated for them to perform). Most students find themselves in the third category he said.

rupees a month (i.e., 6000 rupees for a six month course). For Tanmay this was nothing but “loot”. Subhash said that the lack of infrastructure in the rural areas makes it possible for such coaching centres to mushroom and make easy money exploiting the gap. Shops have sprouted in coaching hubs in Allahabad, said Vikas, which take a hefty commission of up to 1000 rupees each for just assisting the students in filling online forms. Those like Tanmay have no choice but to pay the price. When asked why he came all the way to Jaipur, he said he could either have gone to the district headquarters in Sikar or to Jaipur. And despite the fact that Jaipur is further away from home and is a more expensive place to stay in, he chose it again for the *mahaul*.

Dinesh sir as he is referred to by the students in a coaching centre in Jaipur, was himself a competitor once. Coming from a rural background, he managed to graduate doing tuitions on the sides and got a private sector job in Bangalore. He found it difficult however, to sustain in Bangalore and finally took to preparing for the civil services. He cleared the prelims but eventually had to give up trying. Like many such competitors, he thereafter decided to use his years of experience as a competitor to coach others like him.

### Box 1: *Aat bata Nao* – Living Conditions

Be it Katra in Allahabad, Mukherji Nagar in Delhi or Vivek Vihar in Jaipur, a stroll through the streets after sunset in these areas would provide a familiar setting, what the novelist K D Singh<sup>1</sup> calls *mahaul*. Competitive exam magazines, forms, photocopy and printing shops, second hand prep books, online form fill-up and stationery shops are interspersed with *chai* stalls, juice corners and hundreds of fluorescent leaflets vying with each other to grab one's attention for one or the other coaching classes. Advertisements for lodges, girls' hostels, libraries, reading rooms, PGs dot the lanes. For about three-four hours in the evenings, the streets are almost entirely occupied by people in their early to mid twenties. They have all come for their *taiyaari*, or preparation.

From the gates of the central library of the Allahabad University when we finally left for Niraj's lodge in nearby Baghada, it was already past 9pm. On a by-lane we entered a dark damp and narrow corridor which served as the entrance. It took a while for our eyes to adjust while Niraj led the single file through the corridor with practiced ease. The corridor opened into a dimly lit space adjacent to a common washroom. The suppressed hum of a machine that we could hear while passing the narrow corridor was louder now. A grinding machine for grain was kept on in the adjoining garage that only the owner has access to. Walking ahead we reached a small courtyard and a staircase. As we traced the unprotected staircase going up the building we could see rooms flanking the courtyard for four floors. At the very top one could see a slice of the dark sky. As we climbed up the stairs, we could peep inside rooms that were kept open for ventilation. Each room, we were told, was 8/9 feet with usually two occupants. Unless there were brothers, cousins or acquaintances (*gaonbhai*) from the resident's village who might have just arrived in the city. In which case, the small rooms would accommodate 3-4 people at a time. Each room had just enough space for a bed, a small rack or almirah, a small table either for study or for stacking competition magazines and a corner in the same room which was the designated kitchen.

By the time we visited the lodge, as these rented buildings are colloquially called in Allahabad, competitors staying there had returned from their respective libraries or coaching centres and it was time to cook. We were greeted by whistles from pressure cookers and a mix of aromas from each of the floors as we marched towards what they called "heaven" – a small but breezy terrace. We spoke to some residents who took out time to meet with us. They paid 2000 rupees per person for the rooms and all the rooms were occupied by competitors. All the residents came from villages and belonged to farming backgrounds. The youngest, a 17 year old boy from a neighbouring district, had just landed in Allahabad after completing his 12<sup>th</sup> grade examination. When asked why he had come here, he didn't have an answer at first, but then said "Taiyyari karenge". This was one of the classic lodges that housed them away from their homes, in Allahabad city and where they spent the years of *taiyaari* till (and if) they find a job.

The average expense on rent per month in Allahabad is 3,737. In Delhi one pays nearly double the amount on rent with an average expense of 6,638 being reported to us. Even among those who can afford to go to Delhi to prepare, this kind of an expense is not something everyone can sustain over a long period of time,



View of the lodge from "heaven", the terrace. In Allahabad.



A competitor's den. 8ft/9ft.

What matters a lot in terms of lodging in cities, particularly in the initial months, is social networks and kinship connections. Niraj said that the room he stays in was first inhabited by his *mama* (maternal uncle) as early as 1994! Ever since, it has been occupied by one or the other “competitor” from their extended kin network. Despite the congested, grimy living conditions in the lodge, the residents there were unanimous in their appreciation of their lodge. Two things counted the most in their appraisal of their living quarters – firstly, this lodge had a decent water supply (something very few lodges have) and secondly, the rates have not been increased for the last 3 years. A basic living necessity (water) and constant rental charges; that these two conditions were met made the competitors staying there a grateful lot.

## V

### Conclusion

#### **Joblessness, Unfairness in selection process and the question of organisation**

*Lack of jobs is a very serious issue...even at 7% growth, [we are] not producing the jobs... 25 million people applying for 90,000 railway jobs is a reflection of the fact that we have a real job problem.*

- Raghuram Rajan, Noted economist and  
Former Governor of the Reserve Bank of India (Interview, December, 2018)

Sometimes bizarre numbers can make people see what they find hard to digest. With official data being distorted and withheld, India’s jobs crisis still has its own share of ridiculous statistics. Sample the following:

- Last year 13 job vacancies for waiters at the canteen of the Maharashtra Secretariat Mantralaya (eligibility requirement class 4 pass) attracted 7,000 applications, mostly from graduates.<sup>8</sup>
- When after almost twenty years the government of Gujarat announced vacancies for 12,000 Class 3 posts last year, it saw an enormous 37.7 lakh applicants.<sup>9</sup>
- Mumbai witnessed a similar phenomenon when over 2 lakh people applied for 1,137 openings in the most junior category of constable in the Mumbai Police.<sup>10</sup> This included doctors, lawyers and engineers.
- 3 lakh competitors applied for a mere 69 posts in the Maharashtra Public Services Commission.<sup>11</sup>
- 25 million applied for 90,000 Group D jobs announced by the Railway Recruitment Board
- In 2015, Uttar Pradesh government received 23 lakh applications for 368 clerical jobs.<sup>12</sup>

With such high demand for few secure employment opportunities corruption and irregularities are but a step away. And from what we heard from our respondents, there is big money involved. Respondents routinely indicate that there is a black market for government jobs. Jeevan in Jaipur said that “there are fixed market rates now for buying posts. Higher posts sell for 20-25 lakh. Even Group D posts sell for 8 lakhs. Where will people like us get such money?” The existence of a black market is

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<sup>8</sup> See report by India Today (2019)

<sup>9</sup> See report by Dave (2018)

<sup>10</sup> See report by India Today (2018)

<sup>11</sup> See report by Torgalkar (2018)

<sup>12</sup> See report by Hemrajani (2018)

a telling sign about the high value attached to secure employment and the lack of availability of legitimate means for acquiring the same.

While paper leaks as a phenomenon might not be absolutely new, but in the last few years have seen an escalation in the number of such irregularities. See box below for a list of leaks that came to light in recent years. The SSC paper leak scam of February 2018 made national news. 1,89,843 applicants across the country were competing to fill 9,372 seats when leaked images of the question paper were found to be circulating online. Protests in big cities like Delhi and Patna and even in smaller ones like Bareilly led to a CBI enquiry being ordered into the incident.

The completely unorganised nature of those affected by competitors prevents any organised action on their behalf. The irregularities however have led to the emergence of local organisations of competitors, in small towns and in big cities. It is evidence of increasing irregularities in the examination and selection process, in a context of an intensifying jobs crisis, that over the last couple of years agitations have been witnessed across the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi. In sum, these protests are symptomatic of the deepening job crisis amongst the educated youth. Jeevan said that the media instead of reporting on the most pressing concern of job-crisis in the country is only attempting to deflect with its divisive agenda. He added that those who attempt to speak up against these *ghotalas* and agitate against this model of joblessness, end up getting branded as *deshdrohi*.

**Box 2: Reported Instances of Paper leaks in recent years**

Staff Selection Commission CGLE (February 2018), Bihar Staff Selection Commission (December 2018), UP Subordinate Service Selection Commission (September 2018), Gujarat Police Constable (December 2018), Indian Air Force (September 2018), National Defence Academy (September 2018), HSSC (J), Bihar police Constable & SI (October 2017), Railway Group D, Teacher Eligibility Test (November 2018), UP Police (constable), Basic Training Certificate (October 2018), UPPCL, UP Assistant Teacher Exam (January 2019), J&K PSC (March 2017), Railway Protection Force Sub Inspector, Rajya Sabha Assistant (July 2018), Tis Hazari Court Stenographer, Van Rakshak Bharti Pariksha (December 2018), SSC Multi-Tasking Staff, SSC CHSLE 2017, Chandigarh Police, MPSC Tax Assistant, UP Police Daroga (2016), Odisha TET exam leak, Karnataka police Sub-inspector exam leak, Allahabad High Court Group C and D recruitment (January 2019).

Source: <https://yuvahallabol.in/paper-leaks/>

Competitors have steadily lost faith in the recruitment process owing to complete lack of transparency particularly in the SSC and PCS exams at a time when vacancies have been plummeting, said Rajiv sir. “Standards around transparency and fair evaluation have deteriorated since 2014 and have further taken a dent since 2016,” he added. In our survey 39% of the respondents claimed that the selection process was not fair (21% said *Not fair at all* + 18% said *Not fair*). The figure goes as high as 64% in Jaipur (Figure 12, Appendix).

Even after clearing an exam, he said that the waiting period before joining is marred by inordinate delays, adding to the years of unemployment and desperation among the youth. As researchers we



An FGD with competitors in Jaipur. Several of them had taken part in struggles against irregularities in the examination and selection process in the last couple of years.

had taken particular interest in this area since the agitations that rocked Delhi and other places. Most of the respondents we spoke across the surveyed cities were aware of these agitations<sup>13</sup>. Some had even participated in them. Rajiv sir himself, for instance, had accompanied his students to Delhi during the SSC agitation last year. He was of the firm belief that there is no other way for the unemployed but to organize themselves and make the rising job-crisis an issue of utmost importance.

Sociologists have long wondered about the lack of radical mass mobilisations in India given the high and increasing levels of inequality, poor living conditions and lack of opportunities for social mobility. The overarching answer, it is suggested, can be found in India's unchanging caste system and its articulation with class dynamics that perpetuates the hold of the Indian elite, who constitute a small proportion of the population. However, we know little about *how* this elite manages to retain power against a vast multitude of people who do not see hope in the system as it exists today. We learn from history that in most countries that have seen systemic socio-economic and political change, it is young people who drive the wheels of change; it is the youth who agitate for a better day when they see the present system as providing no hope for the future. The subjects of this report, *the competitors* are not seen as people engaged in social movements, or in upsetting the status quo. After all, the hope of a secure government job keep millions of unemployed youths from turning to radical politics. What happens when this hope gets eroded?

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<sup>13</sup> It is through social media that information about various exams, including the irregularities and protests reaches hundreds of thousands of competitors across cities.

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# Statistical Findings

Figure 1: Gender Composition

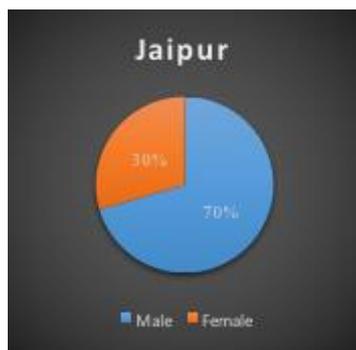
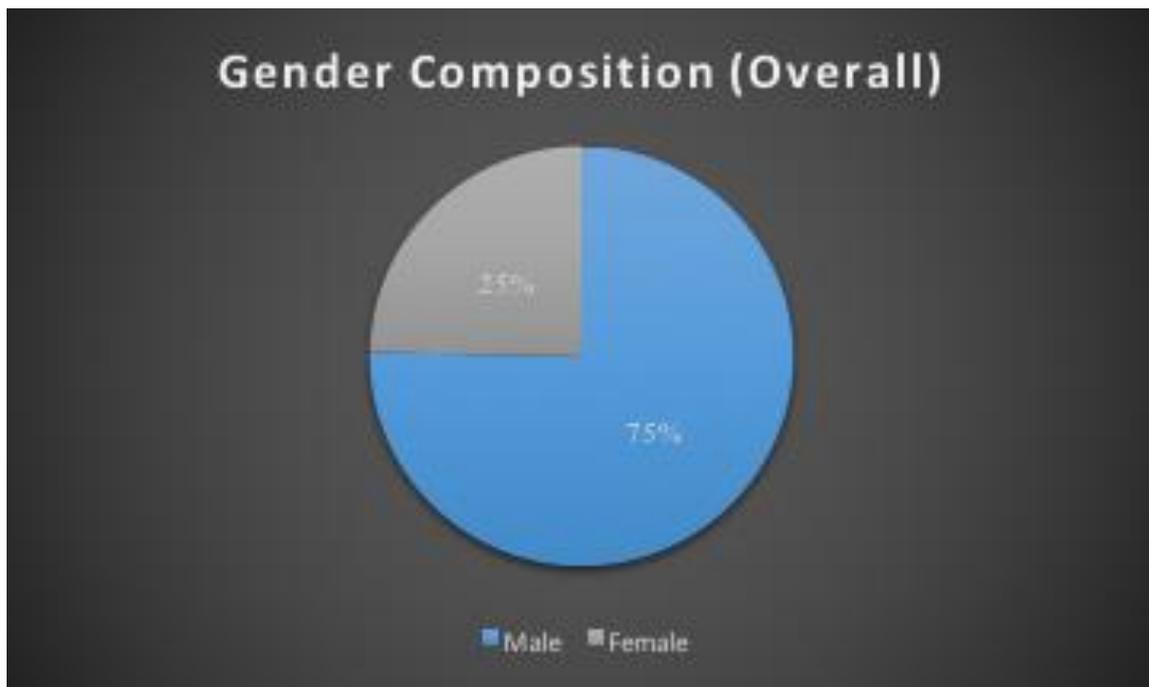


Figure 2: Rurl/Urban

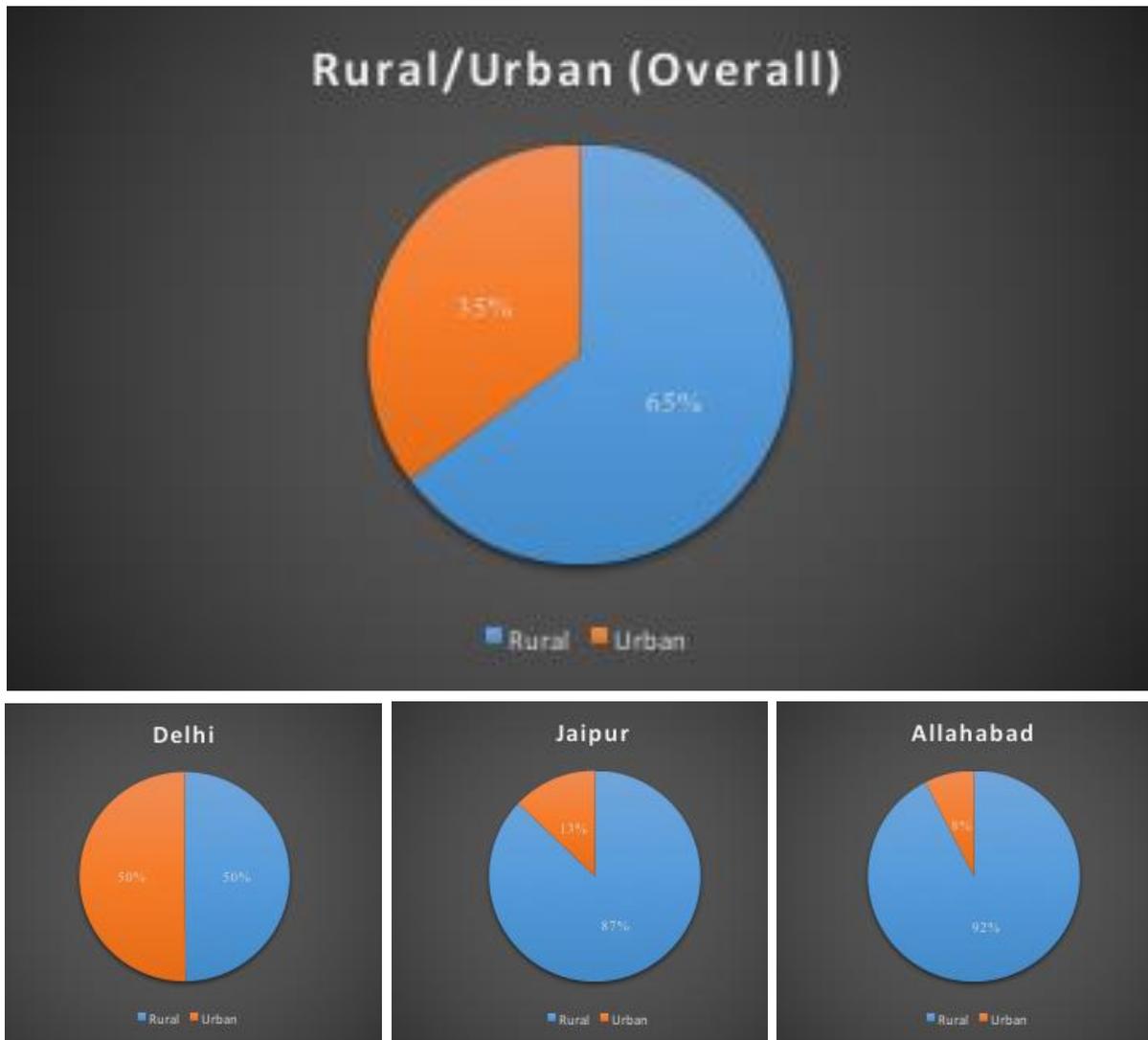


Figure 3: Social Composition

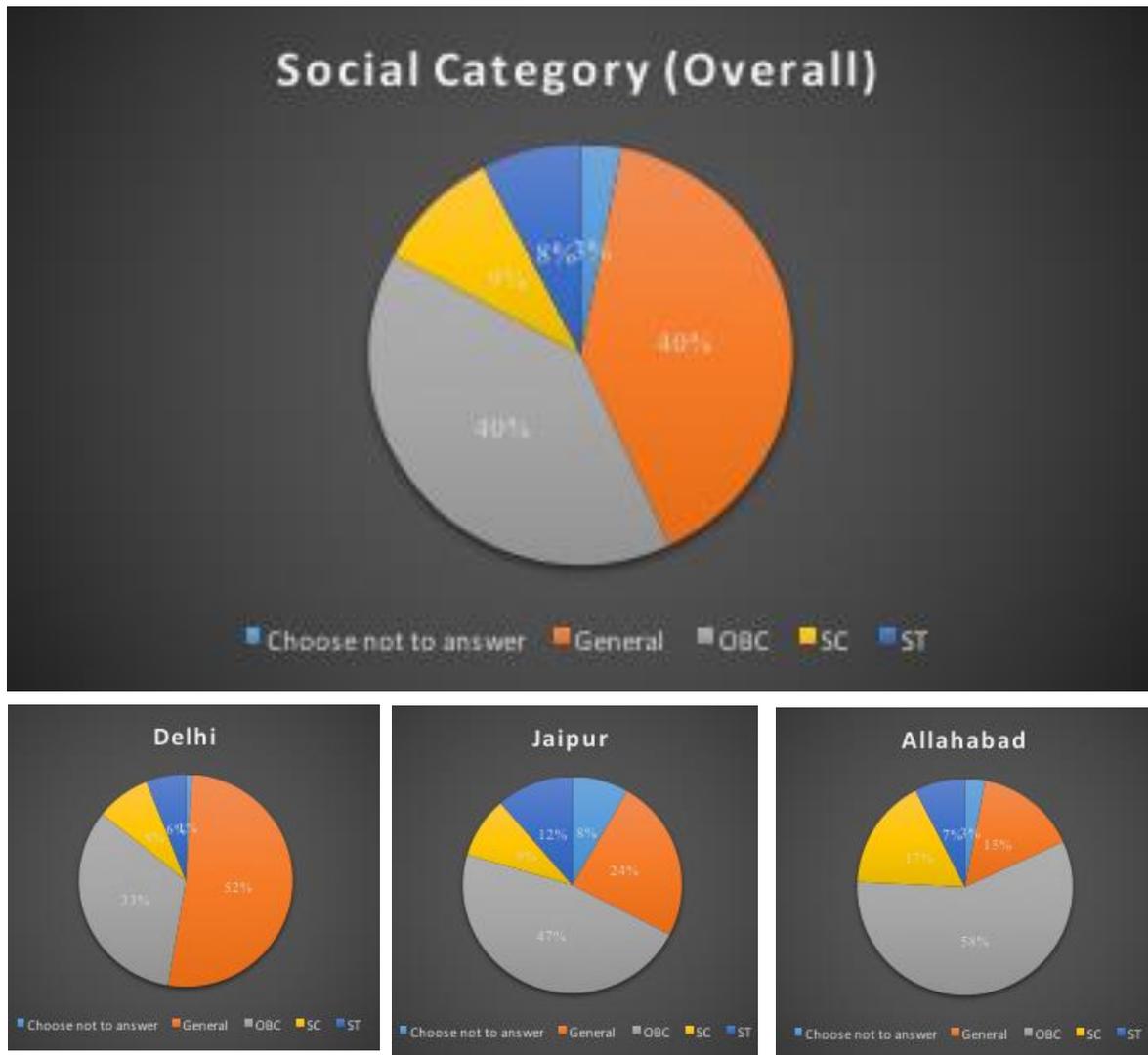


Figure 4: Educational Profile:

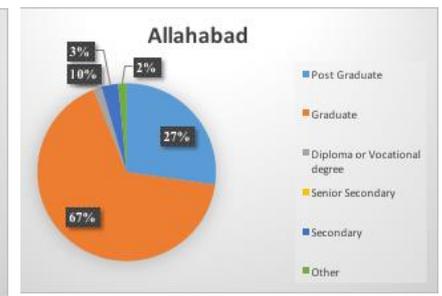
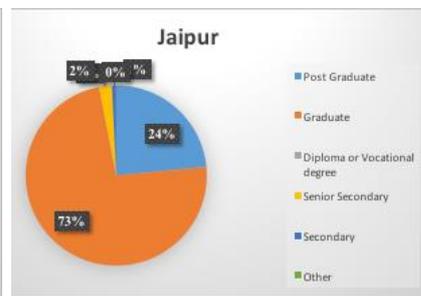
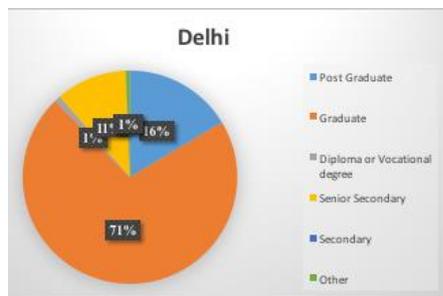
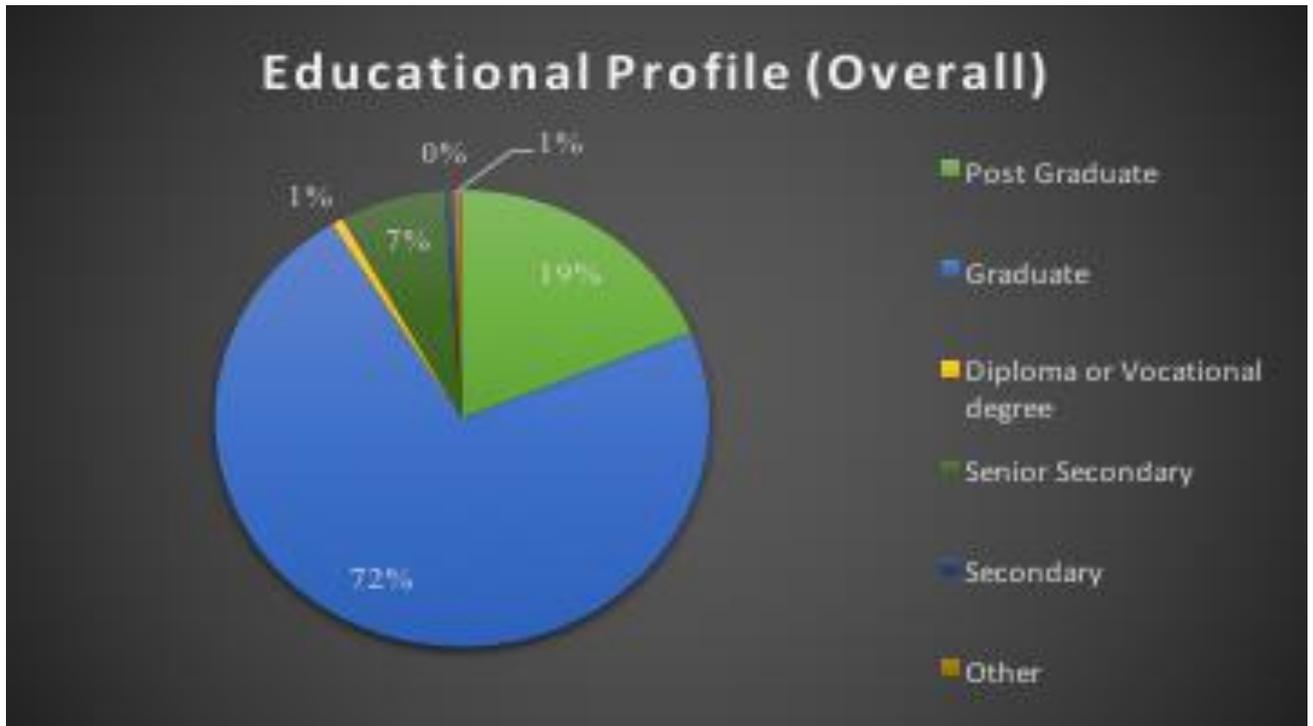


Figure 5: Kind of educational institute last attended

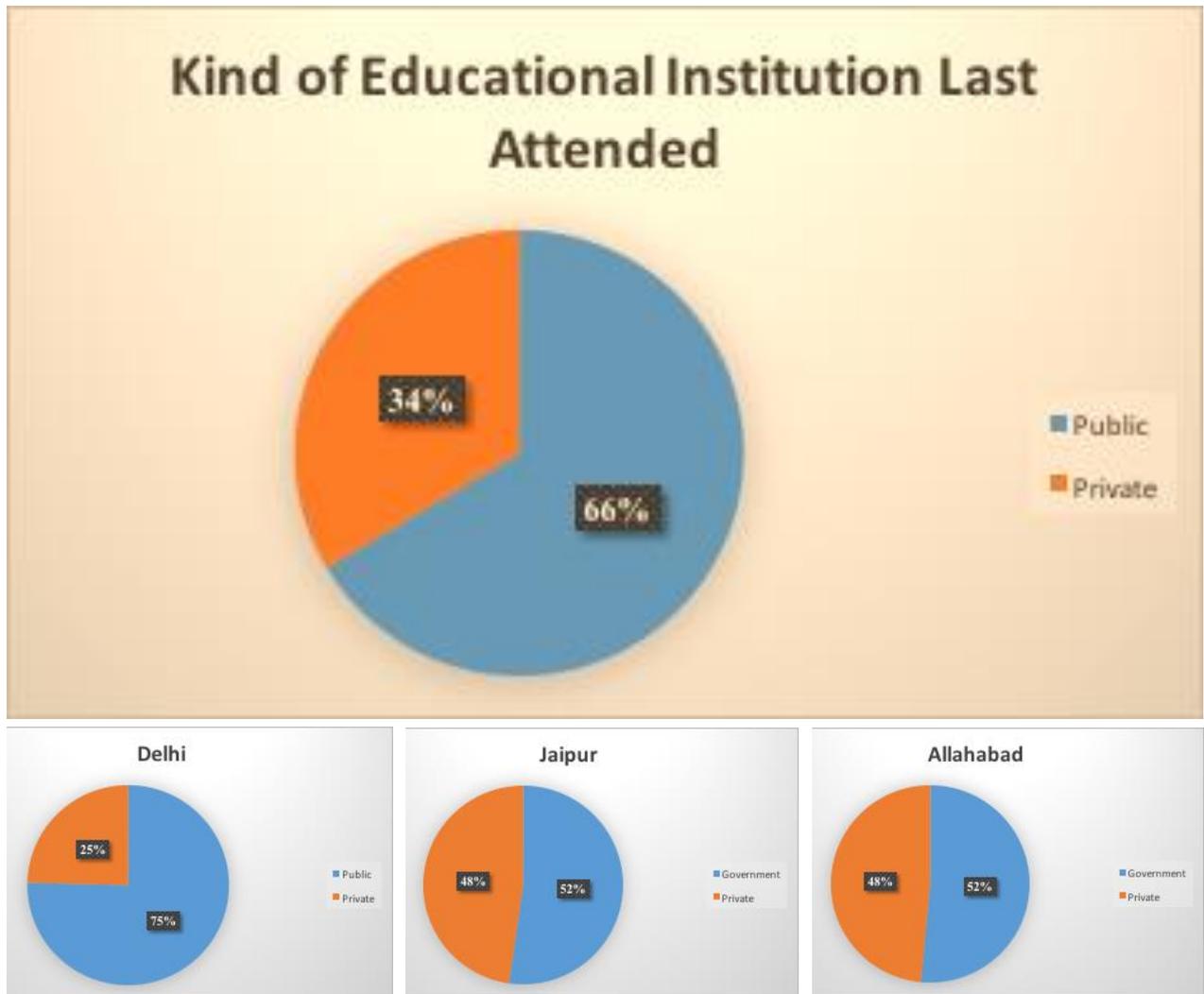


Figure 6: Language of education

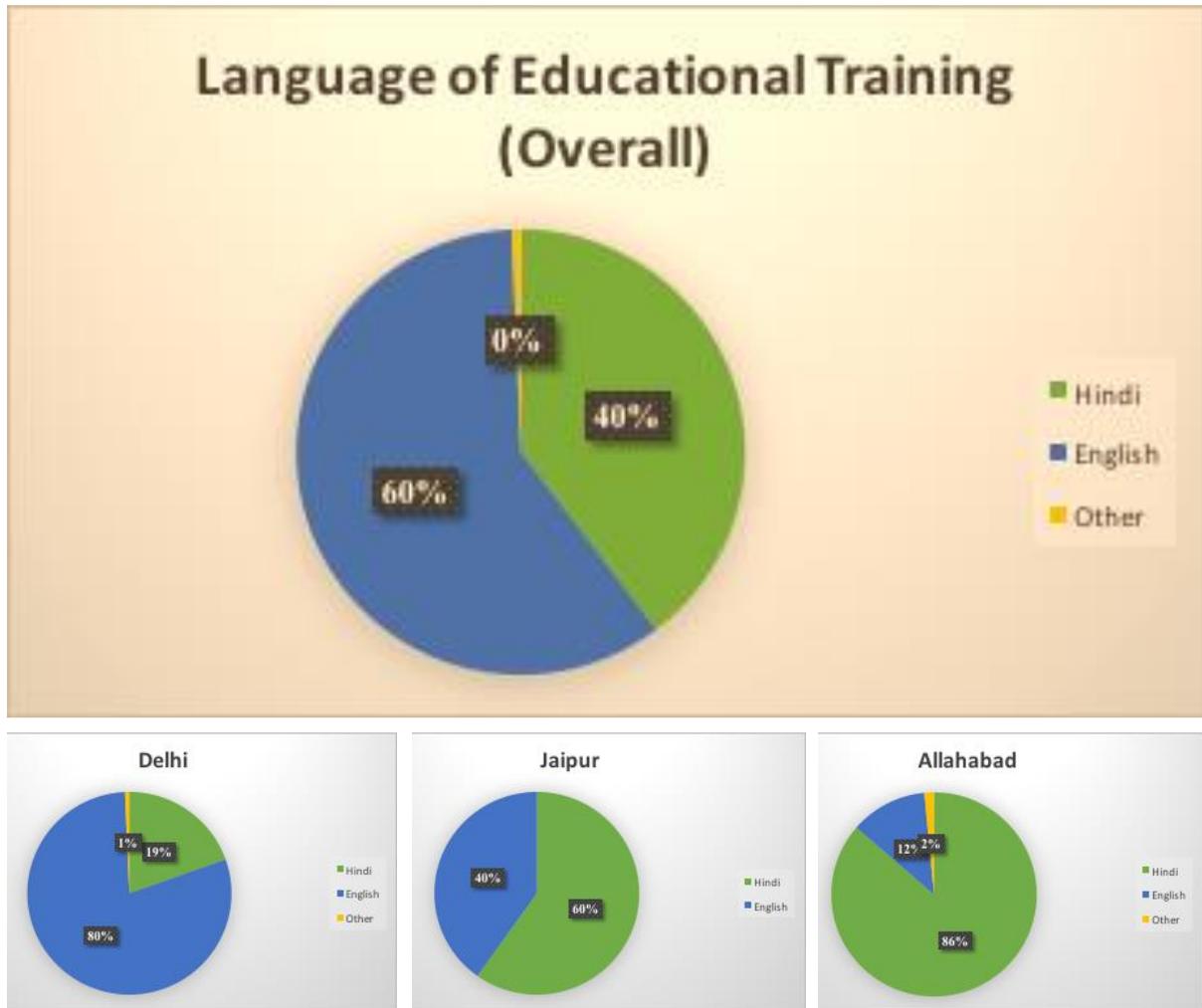


Figure 7: Mother's Educational Profile:

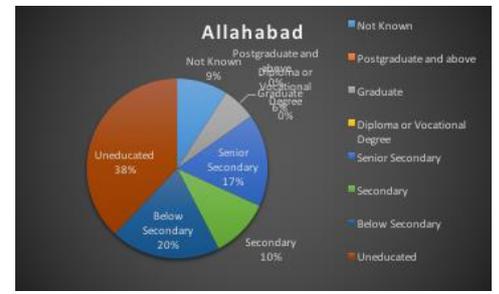
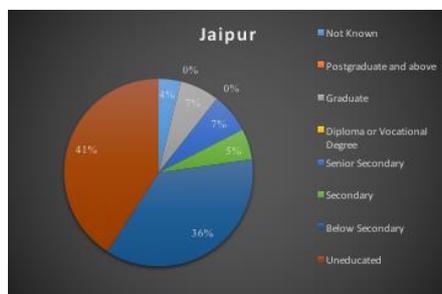
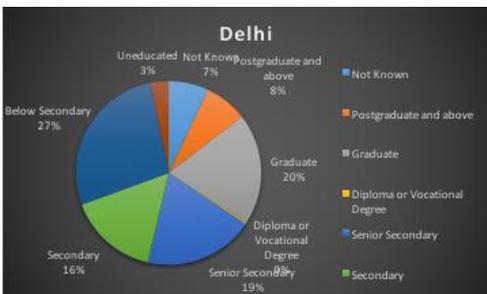
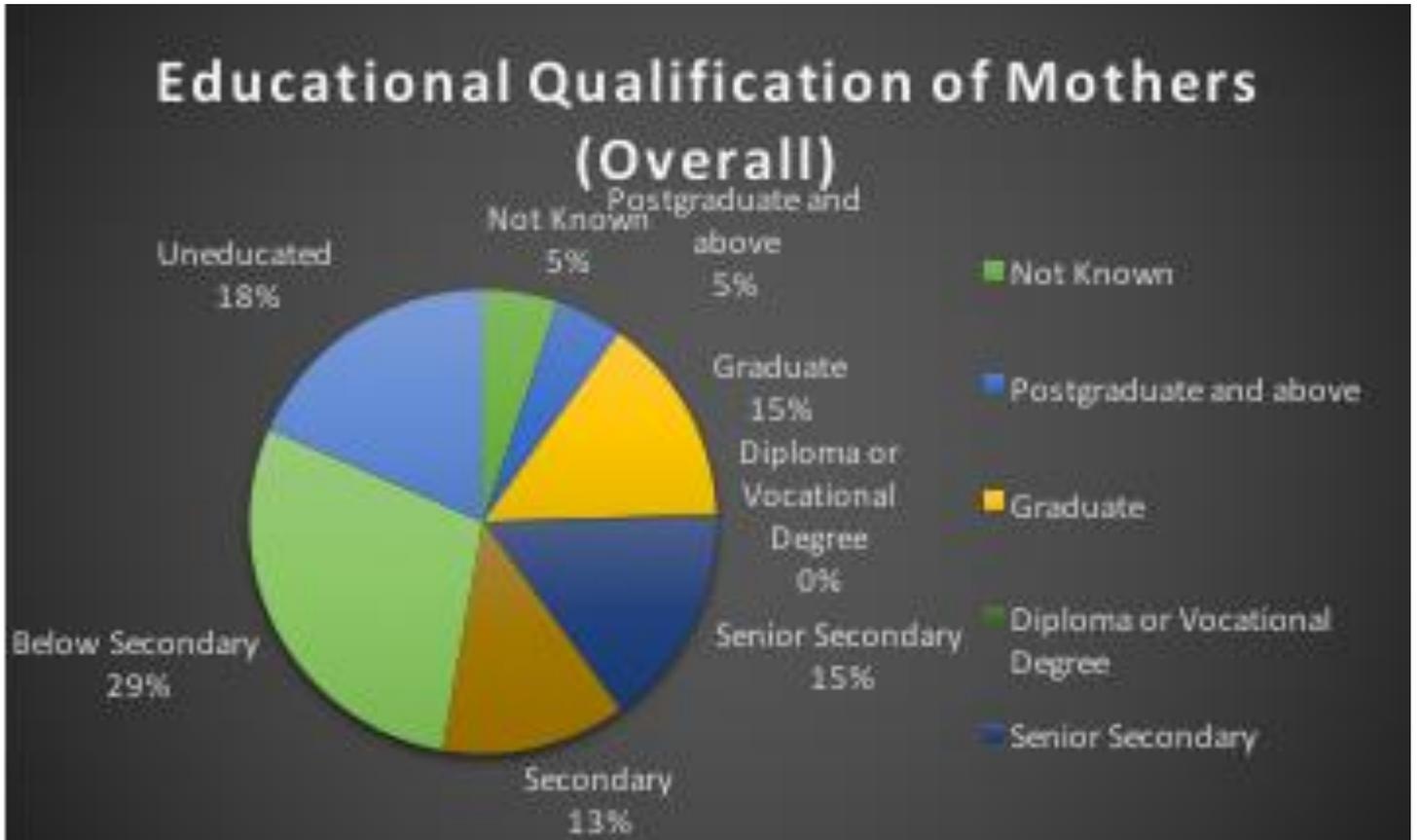


Figure 8: Father's Educational Profile:

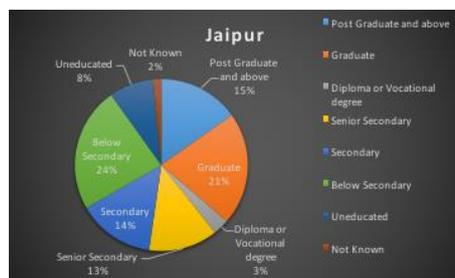
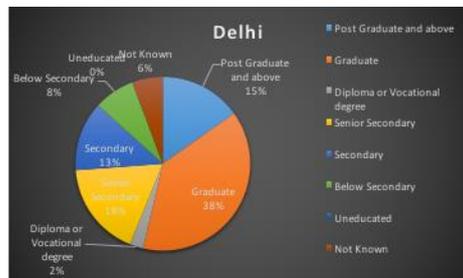
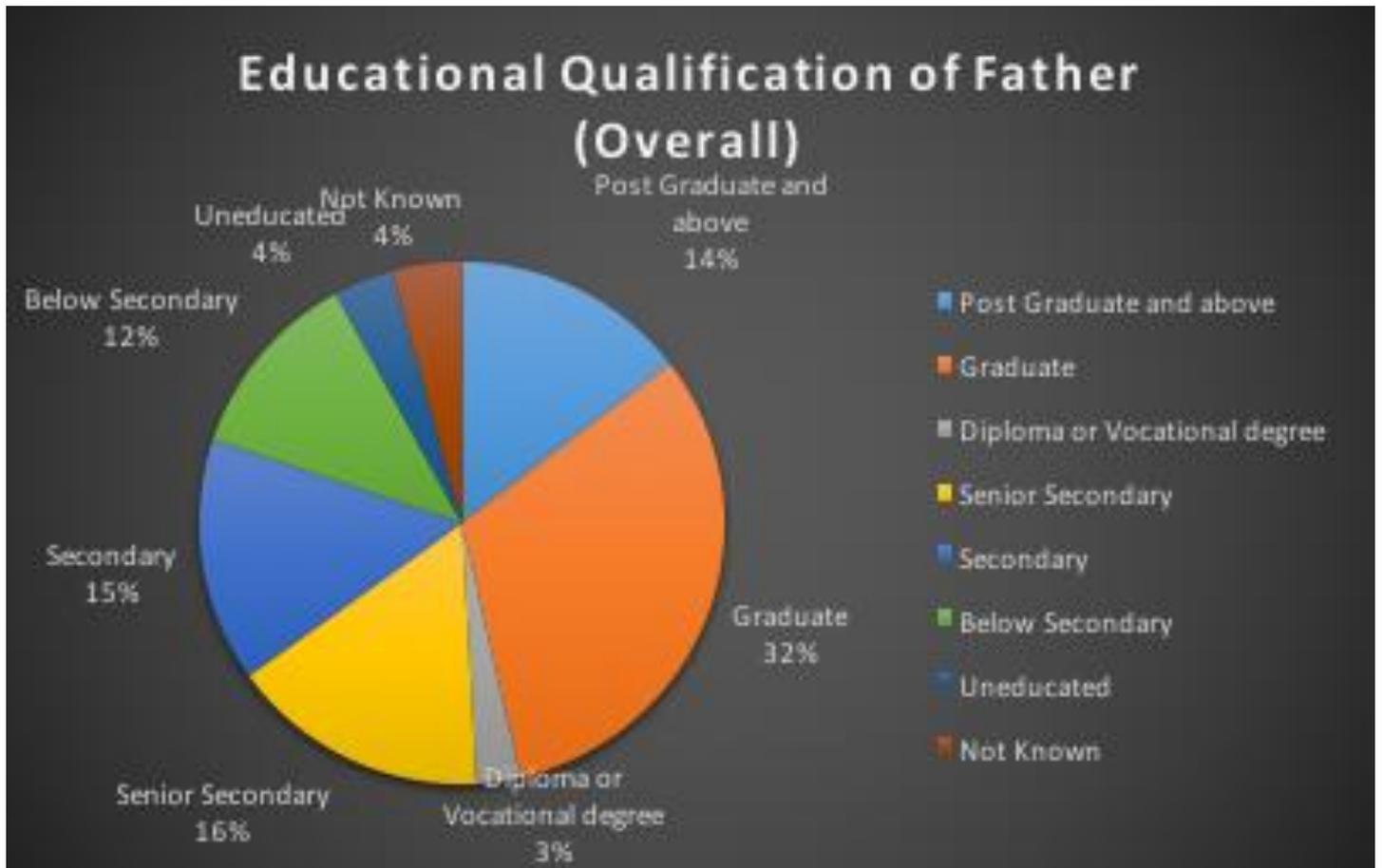
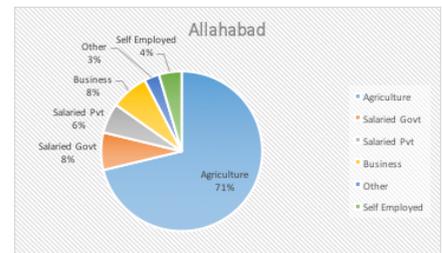
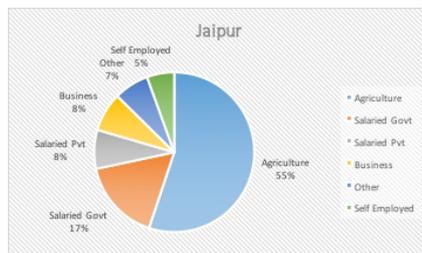
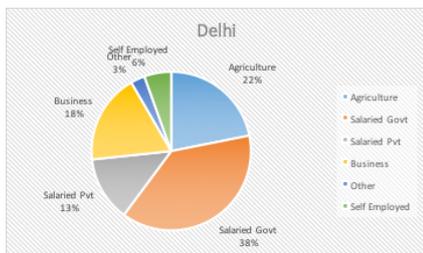
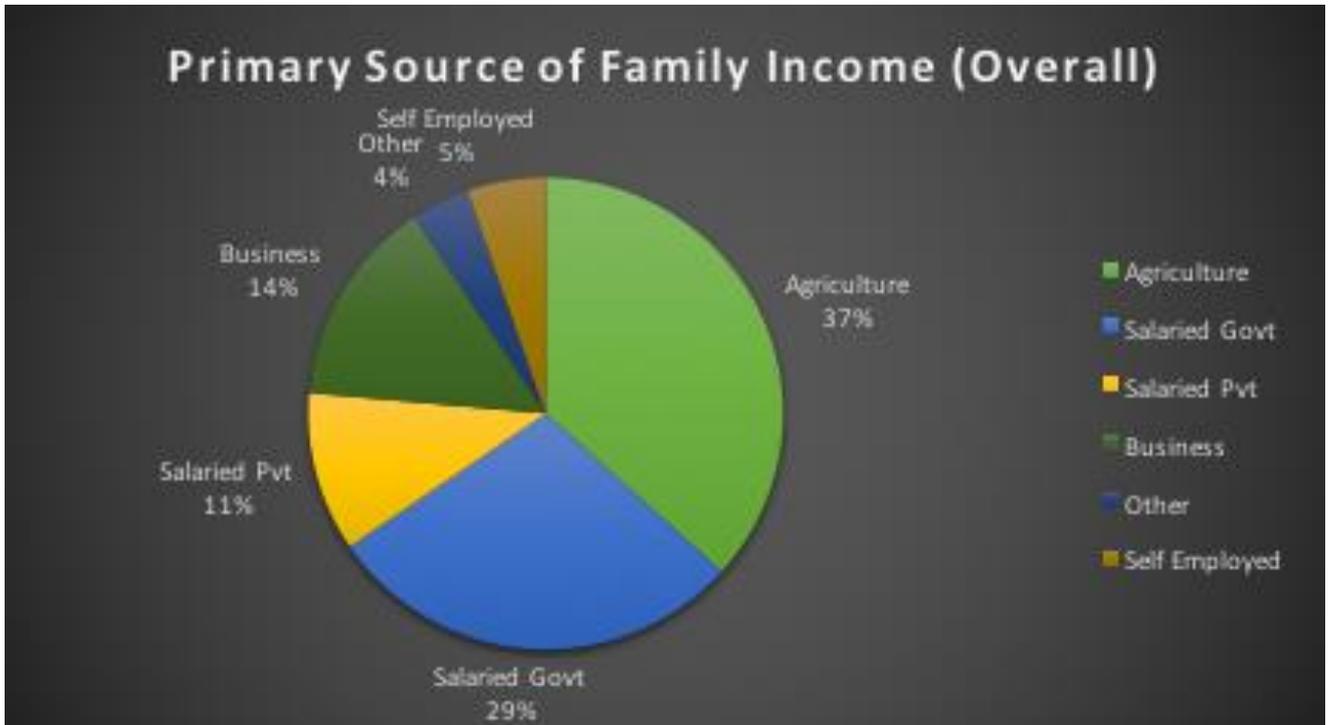
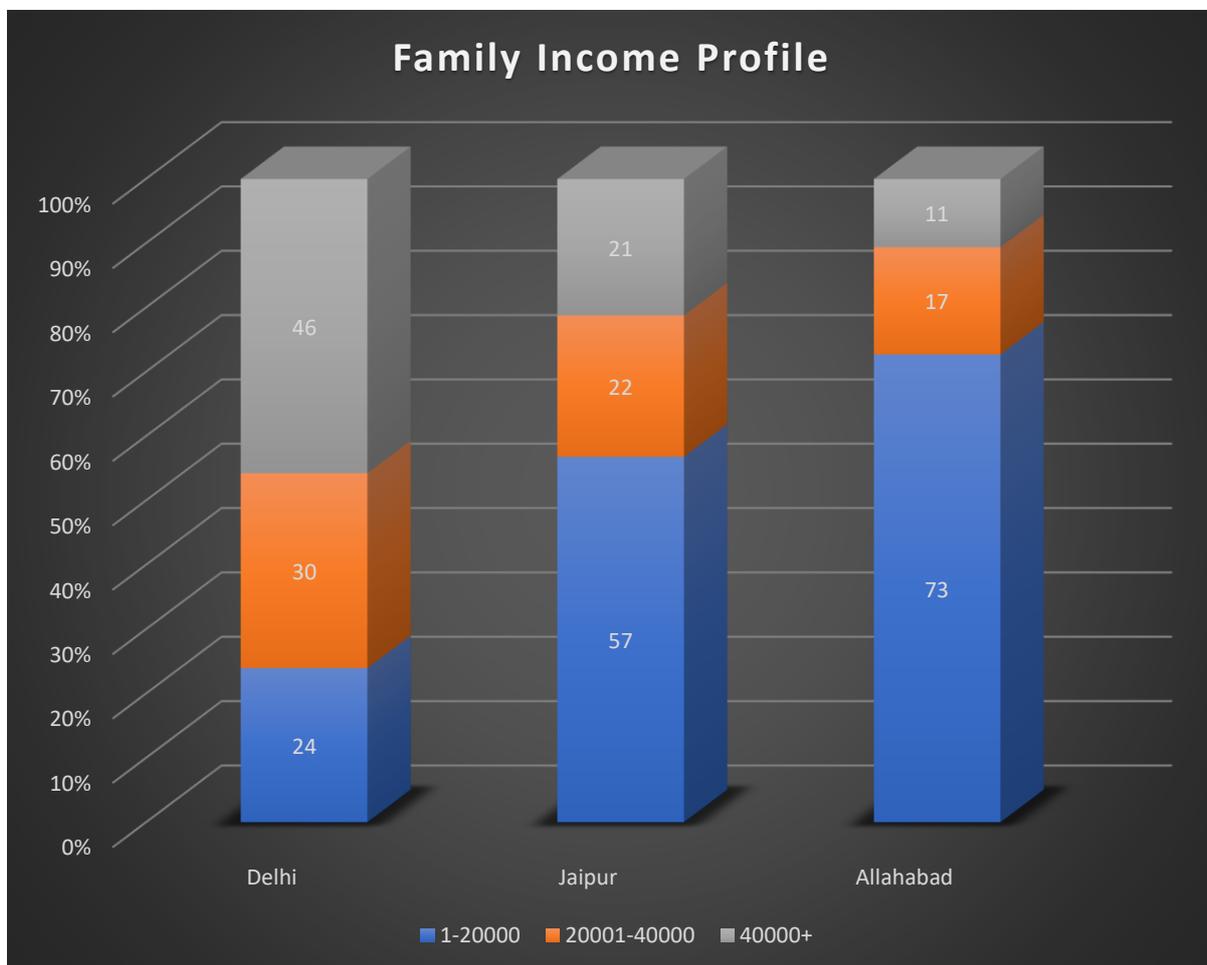


Figure 9: Primary Source of Family Income





**Figure 10: Family Income Profile**

Figure 11: Employment Status

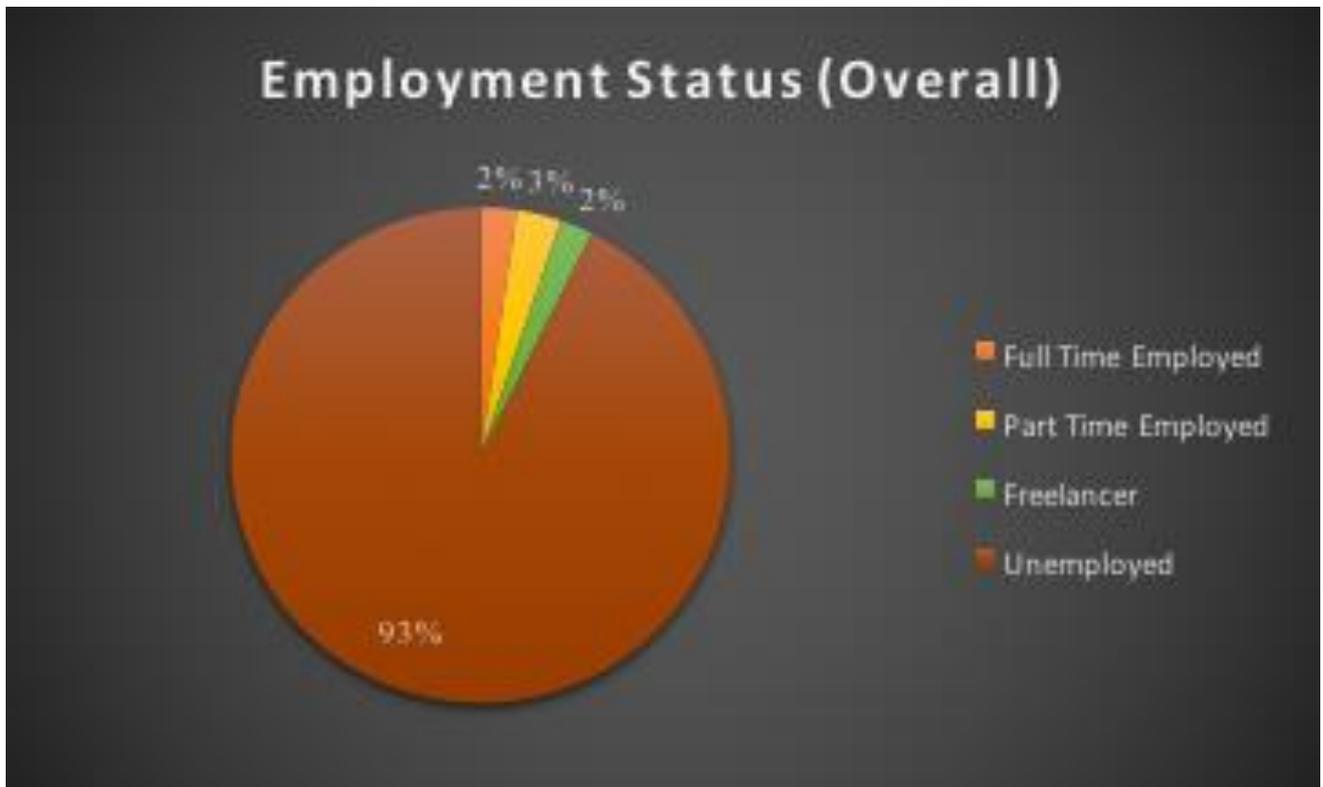
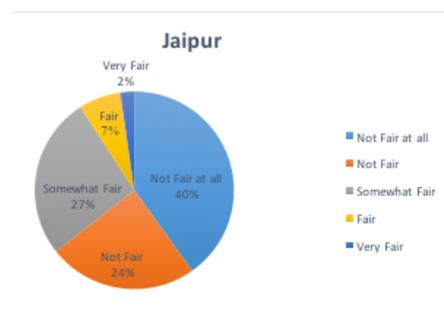
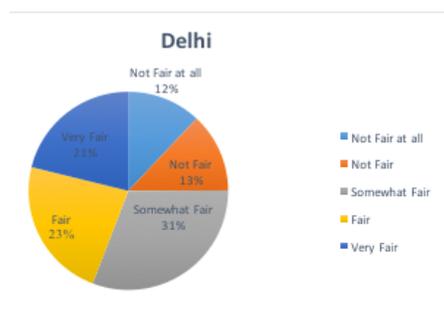
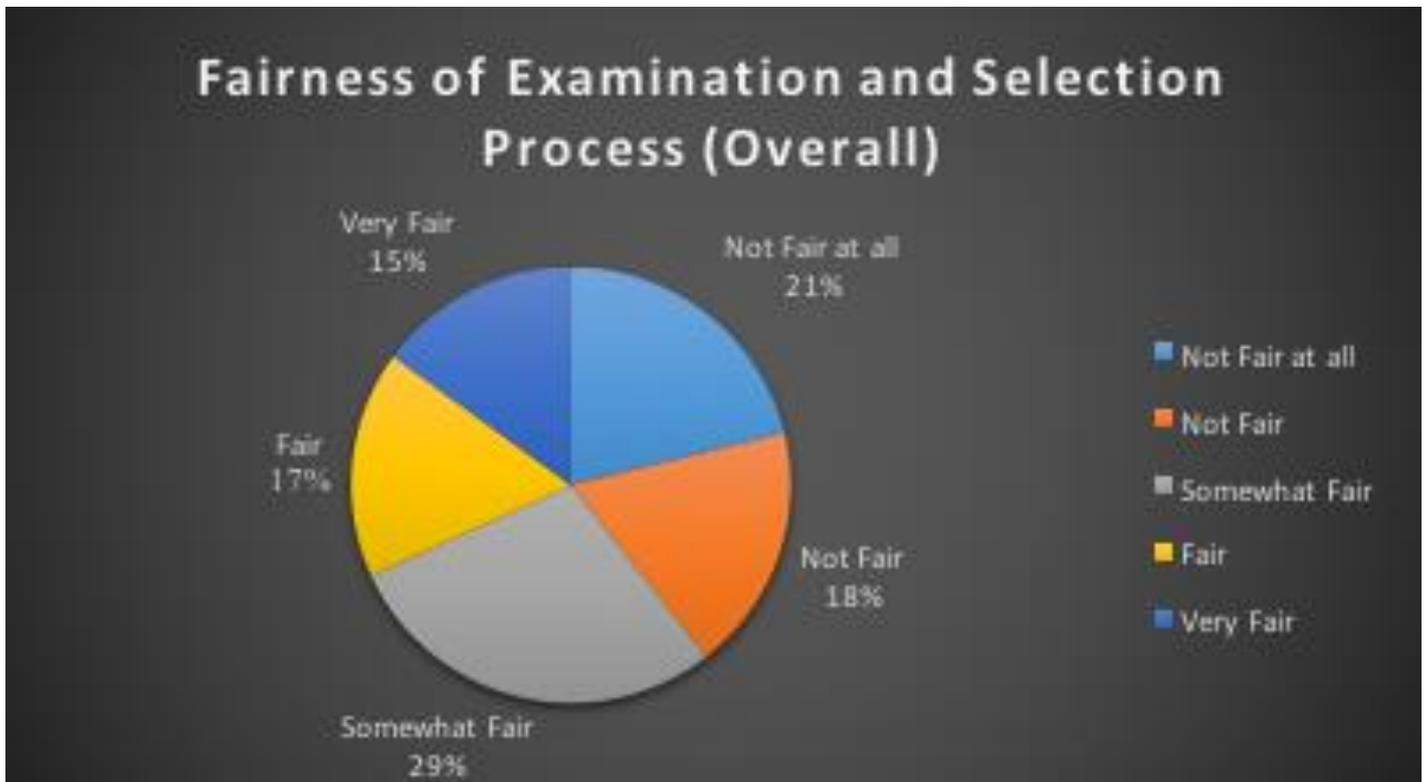


Figure 12: Fairness of Examination and Selection Process



**Figure 13: How Helpful was Educational Training in Preparation for Competitive Tests?**

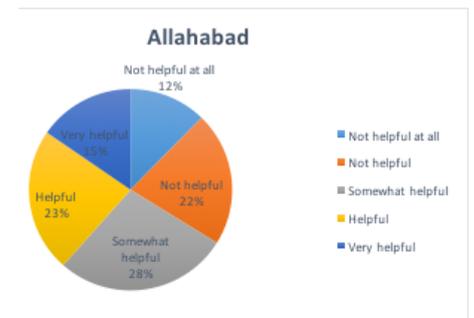
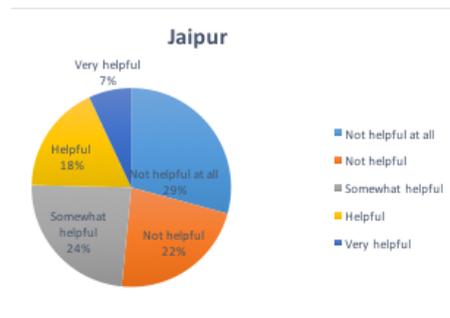
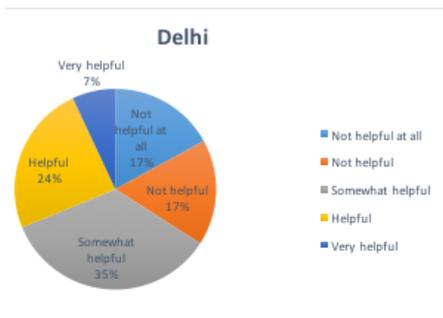
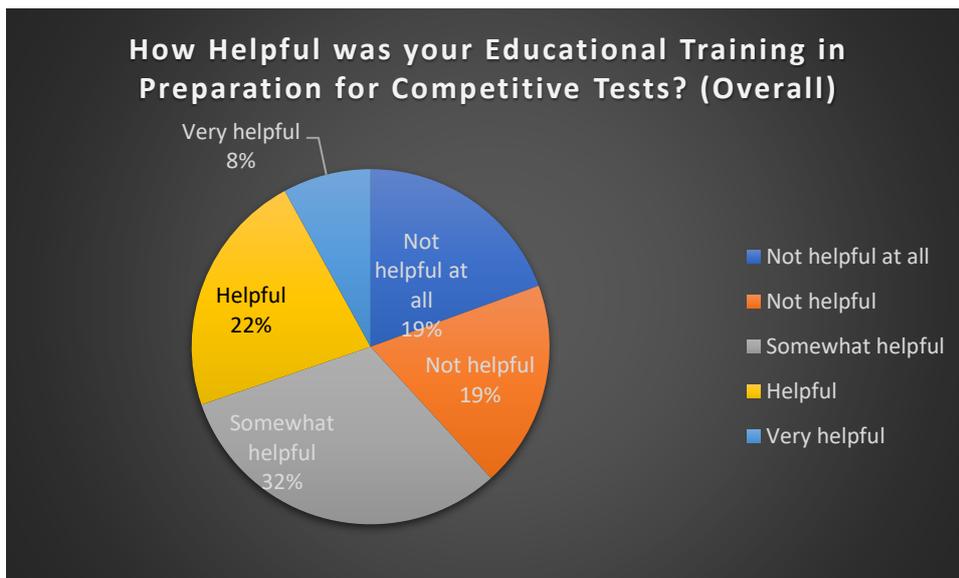


Figure 14: Were Adequate Number of Jobs Created in the last 5 years?

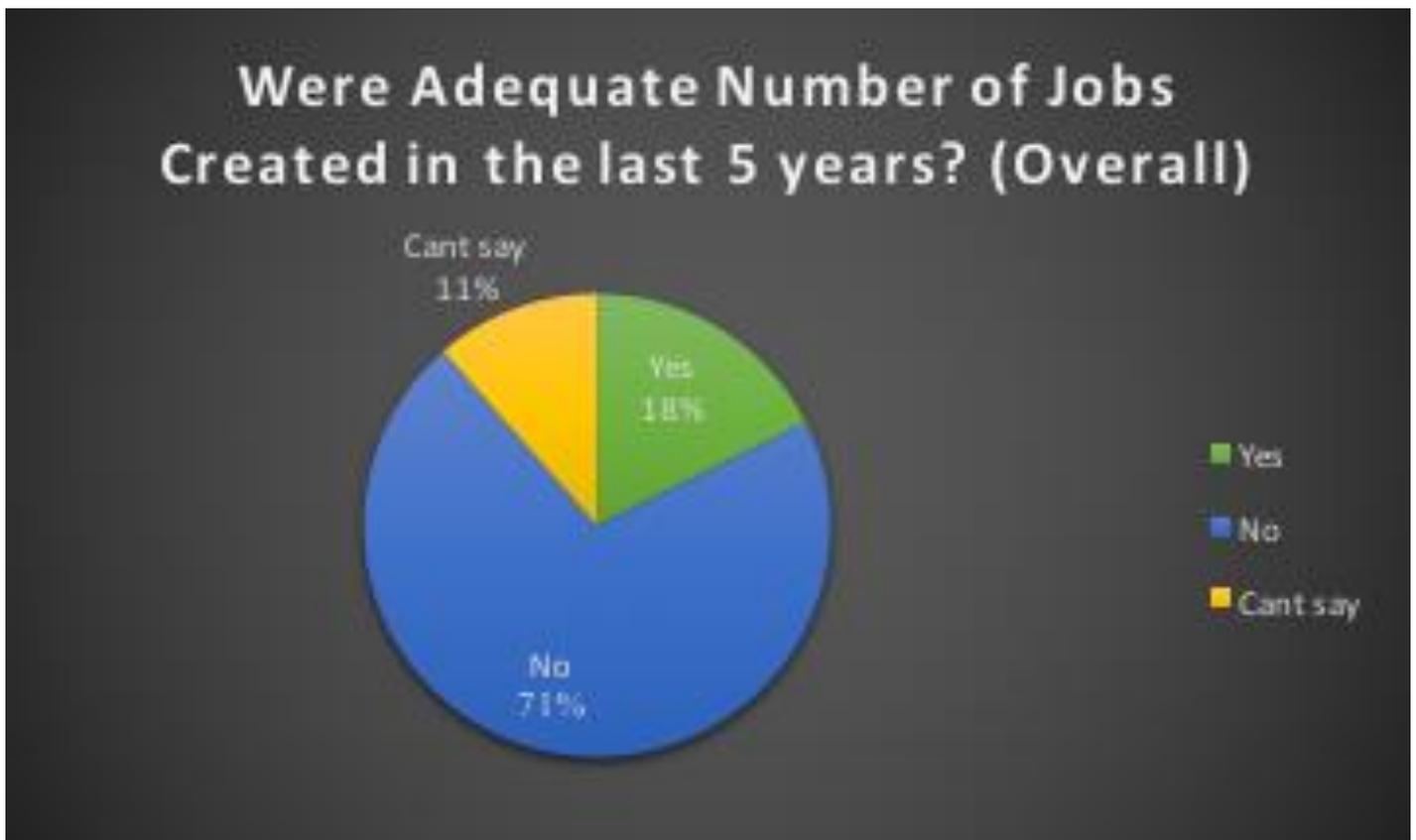


Figure 15: Number of years spent doing preparation

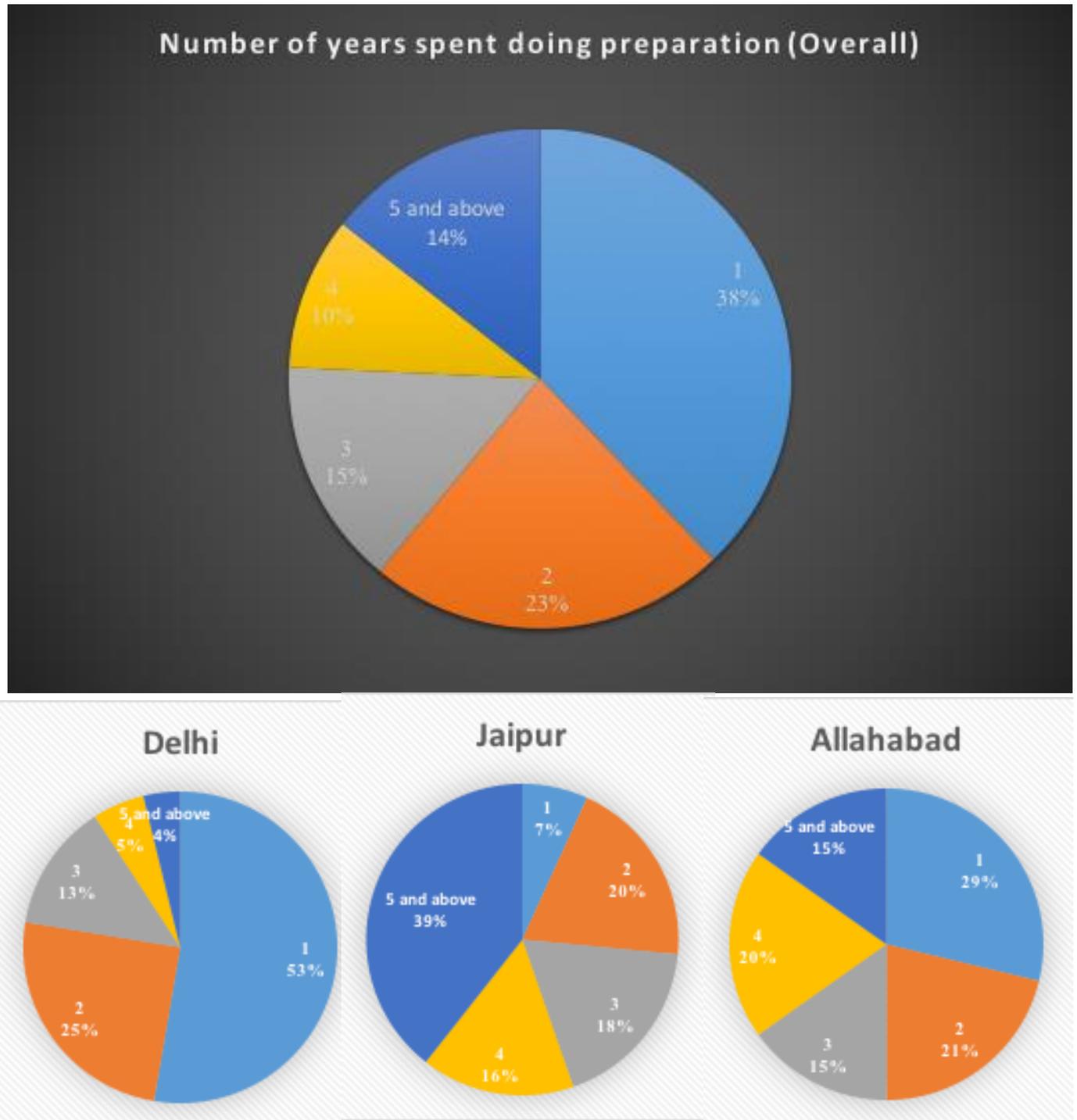


Figure 16: Number of hours spent in coaching institutes for preparation

