

The cultural meaning of Neet

The high-decibel public commentary on the student protests has also had a welcome level of highly intense, deep, and widespread engagement. There has been more public sympathy than criticism, especially after the young ones took charge, and, unlike the norm nowadays, less polarised discourse where you are either reviled as a “*bhakt*” or vilified as “anti-national”. Unlike many other issues, this is not confined to a specific section of society. Commentators, both Indian and foreign, who have characterised this as a protest by the “middle class”, a shorthand for English-fluent young people from comfortably well-off homes with educated parents and seeking top professional qualification, have got it dead wrong.

A large part of National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (Undergraduate) or Neet-UG takers are from lower-income homes, with parents who are poorly educated and employed in low and unpredictable income, occupations, and are first-generation college goers. They take Neet — increasingly the default entry gateway for seats in fields such as nursing (popular among girls), veterinary science, alternative medicine, physiotherapy, and allied health care. This is the “belly” of “aspirational India”, aspiring not just to buy cell phones and bikes and go to concerts but also to become middle class — have a predictable steady income with a regular job, have a qualification and credentials that provide income and social mobility over time and all the good things that come with it.

While the plural of anecdotes is not data, getting closer to the stories of real people helps to get a perspective on the symbolism of government-run competitive exams — why they are such a big deal for so many people, carry so much explosive emotional weight and have such vote-determining power.

A popular agency providing care workers for the

elderly in big cities in South India recruits young women in their early 20s, from semi-urban/rural areas in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh — based on the sample we have interacted with. They are bright and curious, and leave their families for the first time to travel far to strangers’ homes, alien languages, and unfamiliar food. Their goal is to earn enough to pay for college for a BSc nursing degree. A high Neet score gets an affordable government college seat, otherwise the option is a private college with fees five to ten times higher, which may not be doable. Uttar Pradesh government offers ₹20,000 a year scholarship for a BSc nursing student in a private college, where the fee is around ₹1 lakh a year. Re-tests after leaked papers also come at a cost. You may lose your job if you need leave again to go home to appear for the exam; the trips cost money, and you have to choose between your aspiration and a job.

There are nursing diplomas that do not require Neet, but the career and income prospects are poor compared to the BSc degree, and the discourse in the country has moved from “settle for what is your *aukaat* [status]” to stretch for the

maximum you can hope for. Take the case of another young woman in a village near Lucknow whose father irons clothes as gig worker in Mumbai. She managed to get a BEd degree, then spent two years preparing for the Uttar Pradesh Teacher Eligibility Test and SuperTET exams to qualify for a government teachers job, the government job being the holy grail, as we know, for youngsters from lower socio-economic backgrounds because it offers predictable income, job security and coveted middle-class respectability. Her brother trained for two years for “*bharti*” to join the army, which did not come recruiting, then passed the physical and written exams for a border police force; the written paper got cancelled

by the court due to a leak, and he now irons clothes alongside his dad.

Another young man in UP has spent four years after graduation appearing for a government job examination. Twice the exam was not held, twice he failed. When his father was asked why he supported four years of Neet, which, according to one Insta meme, stands for “not in education, employment or training”, he said that his son was the first college-educated person in the family, and he wanted to support his ambition.

The symbolism of Neet and other competitive exams is that they are perceived as merit-based opportunities open to all, offering a shot at getting to a higher life orbit. When trust in this breaks down, the sense of betrayal and anger is huge for youngsters and parents alike, possibly powering election outcomes.

In our ethnographic study of lower-income “mass” young India, “Drivers of Destiny” (written about earlier in this column and others), we found that young people did not blame the government for the lack of jobs. They attributed that to “the market”. But in this case, the destruction of even the few avenues of status-blind opportunity is clearly laid at the government’s door. More so, as the government centralises education access.

Note to opposition parties: The best election manifesto, especially as Indians climb Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, is to set up a credible education reform think tank drawing on expertise and models from everywhere, and lead with ideas resulting in concrete redesign and implementation blueprints to build a new education system.

Note to the Government of India: Implementing deep education reform will work better for credibility than heightened Instagram presence. The medium is not the message.

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