

Adolescent Employment: Evidences from Size-Class Urban Centres

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Abstract

The adolescents comprise nearly one-fifth of the country's population. As the country progresses further in its demographic trajectories, the share of adolescents to total population is projected to decline, yet these adolescents of today will replace the country's working population of tomorrow. The paper attempts to understand the current labour market particulars of adolescents in urban India, which is often a least explored issue. The paper uses the available secondary data at the national level for two time periods (2017-18 and 2023-24) to understand the objectives put forth in the study. The analysis reveals that about one-tenth of adolescents are workers in India - with male adolescents dominating the labour market. A host of socio-economic factors play a role in shaping their work participation, with adolescents from socio-economically weaker sections and illiterate ones entering the labour market as a means to supplement household income. The descriptive findings are also supported by statistically significant results. A further delve into the size-class of urban centres reveals significant patterns—with adolescent workforce being dominant in million-plus cities in 2017-18, which declined later in 2023-24. Irrespective of the city-size, three main avenues that employ maximum adolescents are manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles; and construction. Overall, the paper highlighted that over the years there has been a withdrawal of adolescents from the labour market and their share in education has increased, which is a positive trajectory in India.

Keywords: Adolescents, Worker-population ratio, Neither employed, nor attending educational institutes, Size-class cities, Sectors of economy

1. Introduction

The adolescent population (10-19 years) constitutes a critical segment of the society - as the future demographic, social, and economic outcomes of any country typically depend on them. Imparting education and appropriate skills to adolescents have a far-reaching impact on them in particular and on the country as a whole (Registrar General of India and UNFPA, 2014). The transition of adolescents from childhood to adulthood poses unprecedented challenges. For this transition to be smooth and meaningful, governments across globe have launched several schemes and programmes - naming a few: Take Action for Adolescents in United States of America (Office of Population Affairs, no date); Better Youth Spaces fund in United Kingdom (Lea, 2025); Youth Justice Services Funding Program (Government of Canada, no date); National Adolescent and Youth Health policy (Republic of South Africa, 2017). Similarly, under various ministries, the Government of India has framed several policies centered on promoting adolescents' health, nutrition, education and empowerment.

The Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG, 2010), evolved from Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (SABLA), focuses on out of school adolescent girls (11-14 years) and aims at supporting them to successfully transition back to formal schooling or bridge learning/skill training. It offers nutrition through take-home-ration via Anganwadi centers, health check-ups, life skills training, vocational skills under the National Skill Development Program, and linkages to formal education for out-of-school girls. In 2022, the scheme has been subsumed under Saksham Anganwadi and Mission Poshan 2.0. As adolescent girls in the age group 11-14 years are covered under Right to Education Act, 2009, the targeted beneficiaries under the revised scheme are adolescent girls in the age group of 14+ to 18 years in Aspirational Districts and North Eastern States (Ministry of Women and Child Department, 2022). The Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK), launched in 2014 under the National Health Mission, reaches both boys and girls via Adolescent Friendly Health Clinics (AFHCs), peer educators, weekly Iron Folic Acid Supplementation (WIFS), and counselling on reproductive health, mental health, substance misuse, and violence prevention (National Health Mission, no date). Further, the School Health and Wellness Programme – implemented as a part of Ayushman Bharat - trains teachers as Health and Wellness Ambassadors to deliver weekly sessions on 11 health themes like nutrition and mental well-being in government schools (ibid).

These schemes have definitely impacted the life of adolescents in terms of health, education and empowerment outcomes. Studies across India have pointed out that the implementation of these schemes has led to significant reduction in the days of school missed, a reduction in the proportion of girls getting married in 18 years or below (Institute for Fiscal Studies et al., 2018); receipt of counselling services and health education from Adolescent Friendly Health Clinics (Shah et al., 2022); and an enhanced role of peer-educators in supporting communities during pandemic (Arora et al., 2022).

Having said that, the existence of numerous schemes for adolescents address their physical, behavioural and psycho-social, focusing mostly on health behaviour, knowledge gaps, and lack of awareness about physical and psychological changes (Sivagurunathan et al., 2015). A large body of literature focusses on adolescent sexual and reproductive health, mental health, nutrition, violence against, and education-related outcomes (Kapoor et al., 2021; Ramaswamy et al., 2020). However, limited literature exists on adolescents and their labour-market outcomes.

The paper is a modest attempt to explore the labour market particulars of adolescents living in urban India. This gap likely stems from the wide age range of adolescence (10-19 years), during which individuals transition from complete legal restrictions on entering the labour market, to restricted entry (e.g., bans on hazardous sectors), to no restrictions at all - exemplifying interesting yet crucial transformations. This paper is a modest attempt to explore the labour market experiences of adolescents living in urban India. Further, adolescent labour in India and other South Asian countries are largely viewed as rural phenomena; since most of the working adolescents are engaged in agricultural sector. As a result, policy efforts have primarily targeted rural areas (Khan and Lyon, 2015; Samantroy et al., 2016). Given India's urbanization level and the significant number of adolescents working in urban India, it is essential to examine the current situation of adolescent workers in urban India.

2. Literature Review

The discussion on adolescent labour remains incomplete, unless a probe has been made of what defines a child labour. The International Labour Organisation defines child labour as any work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential, their dignity and one that is harmful to the physical and mental

development of the child. It includes work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous to children. Work that interferes with a child's ability to attend and participate in school fully by obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to try to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work is also child labour (Bachpan Bachao Andolan, 2021). Child Labour is described by "India's Census 2001 office as the involvement of a child under the age of 17 in any economically productive activity, with or without payment, wage, or profit. Part-time assistance or unpaid employment on a farm, business of family, or any other type of financial interest, like farming and producing milk for sale or everyday use, is involved in this classification. Child labourers in India are divided into two categories by the government: individuals who work six months or more each year are considered the main workers. Additionally, marginal kid workers are those who work for fewer than six months of the year, yet at any point during the year (Tiwari, 2022: 595)". This definition is utmost important as the age-limit overlaps both children and adolescents.

2.1 Adolescents in Urban India

Based on the last Census (2011), about 20.7 per cent (250.5 million) of the country's population were adolescents, of which 72.52 million resided in urban areas. Statistics indicate that urban India hosts the world's largest adolescent population (NIUA, 2020).

Even though the country's total population is increasing and will continue to maintain the pace by the mid of this century, there is a decline in both the number and share of adolescent population in the country (World population Prospects: The 2024 Revision). MoHFW (2020) estimates that the share of the adolescent population to country's population will decline from 20.7 per cent (2011) to 17.8 per cent (2021) to 15.5 per cent (2031), with a concomitant increase in the share of aged population (60 years and above) for the country as a whole. However, the present data set cannot discern the current trajectory of the adolescents in urban areas until the Census is conducted in near future. An estimate from Periodic Labour Force Survey reveals that in 2017-18, about 18 per cent of the total urban population were adolescents. However, the figure declined to 16.7 per cent in 2023-24 - keeping parity with the project trend as highlighted by World Population Prospects (2024) and MoHFW (2020).

Given the current and future trajectory of adolescent population in the country, there is a need to invest in education, health, and infrastructure to enhance the productivity and skills of this young demographic. Further, it is important to create jobs to reap the demographic dividend (Kundu and Banerjee, 2024). Since these adolescents are the adults of tomorrow, they hold the key to the country's future. Investing in their development and well-being will determine the nation's trajectory in the coming decades (Kapoor et al., 2021).

2.2 Adolescent and Work

Child/Adolescent Workers and Legal Provision in India

The nexus between adolescents and work is far more complex. The Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 - an Act to prohibit the engagement of children in all occupations and to prohibit the engagement of adolescents in hazardous occupations and processes, along with connected matters (Government of India, 1986) represents a modest attempt by the Government of India to withdraw children and adolescents from work and mainstream them into education (TISS, 2021).

Article 24 of the Constitution of India prohibits the employment of children below 14 years in any factory, mine or hazardous work. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Bill, passed by Parliament on 22 July 2016, completely bans employment of children under 14 years and prohibits employment of adolescents (14-18 years) from working in hazardous occupations or processes (TISS,

2021). However, work restrictions loosen once an individual reaches adulthood (i.e. 18 years), even though they are still considered adolescent - a period crucial for any individual's overall development.

Scale of Adolescent Workers

Although the Census data is dated, it provides a clear picture of the scale of adolescent workers in urban India. According to Census 2011, about 7.4 million adolescents (10-19 years) were workers, with male-female workers stood at 5.4 million and 2.0 million respectively (Census, 2011). Despite legal restrictions, about 2.3 million adolescents in 10-14 years were workers (male: 1.5 million; female: 0.8 million). The number of adolescent workers increases in 15-19 age group - following the loosening of restrictions under the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation Act), 1986 with about 5.0 million adolescent workers (males: 3.8 million; females: 1.2 millions) (also see RGI, GoI and UNFPA, 2014).

The gendered notion of males as primary breadwinners extends to adolescents: the work participation rate (WPR) among males in 10-19 years stood at 14.9 per cent, compared to 5.8 per cent among females in 2011. Notably, the WPR for urban adolescents remained nearly stable across the two census periods of 2001 and 2011. In 2001, adolescents (10-19 years) was 10.1 per cent holding steady in 2011 as noted above.

Class-Caste Nexus

In India, many adolescents transition from school to work or continue both, largely determined by their household's socio-economic status and demand for labour in the family (Ganguly et al., 2023). Studies consistently show that adolescents from socio-economically disadvantaged section are disproportionately represented in paid jobs (Jajoria et al., 2024). Notably, a study by Chowdhury (2020) in Bihar illustrates how caste-status controls the nature of work even among adolescents. The study highlighted that children from Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) are often selected to work as ragpickers, barbers, and cobblers, among other lowly jobs. In contrast, non-SC/ST children are chosen to work at parties and weddings, among other events due to the notion of 'purity' upheld by caste believers (ibid). Linking caste and class dynamics, the study also observed that adolescents from disadvantaged groups receive lower pay.

Further, the literature suggest that poverty is the root cause of adolescent labour. For poor households, income from adolescent earnings often comprises 25-40 per cent of the household income - often held crucial for the household survival (Parvatham, 2015). A study by Samantroy et al., (2016) revealed an increase in the number of adolescent workers in urban areas as a result of low income and fewer employment opportunities in rural areas. Although effective implementation of education policies had led to a rise in literate children, inadequate family earnings still compel them to work and supplement household incomes. In Indian context, the system of loans taken by parents - whose children work alongside them - often create triadic complexity, trapping children who can neither exit the loan nor leave the workplace (Musa and Olsen, 2018).

Education and Adolescent Labour

Interlinkages between education and adolescent work are well established. Most often, examined from the perspective of child labour (due to age overlap), a study by Saharia (2014) points out that educational deprivation plays a key role in determining levels of child labour. Even after controlling for income, states in India that focused on universal elementary education were more successful at reducing child labour than those that had not prioritized it.

On the other hand, studies reveal a paradox – Ornert (2018) examined how many adolescents (children) combine work with schooling and suggested that children's work enabled their education. Often the

parents fail to appreciate the role of education in improving their lives or those of their children; the unattractiveness of schools and the teaching process, along with repeated failures leads to large-scale school dropouts (Tripathi, 2010).

Although, poverty compels many children to work full-time for their own survival and that of their families, inadequate school facilities in their communities often contribute to this reality as well. In fact, many schools serving poor communities are of such abysmal quality, and the prospects of upward mobility for graduates are so limited, that the expected returns do not justify the sacrifices involved. While it is true that many children drop out of school because they have to work, it is equally true that many become so discouraged by the inferior quality of education that they prefer employment instead.

Participation in the Workforce and Being 'nowhere'

Numerous adolescents (children) are categorized as 'nowhere' (Khan and Lyon, 2015), 'idle' (Biggeri et al., 2003), or neither in the workforce nor attending educational institutions. These 'nowhere' children and adolescents remain highly vulnerable, often involved in various forms of 'hidden work' such as domestic duties, including water and fuelwood collection. Notably, girls show a higher tendency to become inactive after a certain age compared to boys (Burra, 2005; Samantroy et al., 2016). However, no statistical databases or household surveys capture information on the intensity of their workload or the nature of these activities for these invisible children and adolescents.

Nature of Adolescent Work

In the employment survey of NSSO and periodic labour force surveys, the workers are classified into three categories: self-employed (own account workers, employers, and unpaid family helpers); regular salaried, and in casual workers. A study by NIUA (2020) shows that nearly half of the adolescents in 15-17 years are mainly employed as regular salaried workers, while another almost one-fourth share of each work as unpaid family labours and casual labour in 2017-18. However, incorporating poverty parameter alters the situation somewhat with more poor adolescents in 15-17 years working as casual workers (30 per cent) during the same period. The study further noted that in urban settings, while about half of the boys (15-17 years) are in regular salaried jobs, about 32 per cent girls work as unpaid family helpers in 2017-18. The situation remains roughly the same with a transition of boys and girls from 15-17 to 18-19 years of age-group.

According to the NIUA (2020) report, around 40 per cent of rural young adolescent workers were in hazardous industries in 2017-18, compared to just 18.7 per cent in urban areas. Notably, the proportion of urban young adolescents in such industries has dropped since 2011-12, for both poor and non-poor groups. This decline is evident among urban boys, but urban girls have seen a sharp rise. This trend suggests greater recruitment of the latter into hazardous sectors, particularly home-based manufacturing (ibid).

According to location-specific micro-studies indicate that Uttar Pradesh leads in sheer number of child labourers across various hazardous industries. Instances of child workers have been documented in carpet manufacturing workshops in the three key districts of Mirzapur, Sant Ravidas Nagar, and Varanasi (Kara, 2014; Arora, 2024).

Numerous children are employed in Bareilly and Aligarh's lock-making industries, Agra's footwear manufacturing sector, Firozabad's glass production, and Moradabad's brassware workshops. Many of these child workers are involved in family-run businesses, which often go unreported. Additionally, child labour appears in Rajasthan's urban tourism sector, gem polishing, limestone product manufacturing, and carpet weaving. In urban areas of Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Karnataka, children are commonly found working

in restaurants and small retail shops (Samantroy et al., 2016). However, the government took necessary steps to curb child-labour from several hazardous industries (PIB, 2012).

3. Objectives and Methodology

3.1 Objectives

Within the discussed framework, the paper modestly seeks to examine the adolescent labour market participation in urban India. Specifically, it aims to:

- Analyse the trend and patterns of adolescent labour market participation in India
- Explore how their work opportunities vary across size-class urban centres in India
- Identify the employment sectors that attract maximum adolescent workers across size-class of urban centres, by type and industry

Within these board objectives in mind, the paper also analyses how the socio-demographic and economic embeddedness of the adolescents influence their labour market participation.

3.2 Methodology

Drawing on Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data from 2017-18 and 2023-24, the paper addresses the objectives outlined above. To assess overall adolescent labour market participation, the analysis focuses on the 15-19 age group, with further disaggregated into 15-17 and 18-19 years. Adolescent labour-market participation is also examined from a gender perspective, wherever the sample size permits.

To examine patterns of adolescent labour market participation across size classes of urban India, cities are stratified primarily by population size based on the 2011 Census. This stratification occurs within each NSS (National Sample Survey) region to ensure representative sampling of population. Based on stratum, urban areas are divided into four classes: population < 50,000; 50,000 - <0.3 million; 0.3 million - <1.5 million; and >1.5 million and above.

Simple percentage figures have been used to identify trends and pattern of adolescent labour market participation in urban India.

Binary logistic regression is used to assess the influence of socio-demographic and economic factors on the likelihood of adolescent participating in the workforce.

The equation is as follows:

$$\text{Log} \left\{ \frac{p}{(1-p)} \right\} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{ social group} + \beta_2 \text{ religion} + \beta_3 \text{ educational attainment} + \beta_4 \text{ household type} + \beta_5 \text{ Monthly per capita consumption expenditure}$$

Where, p = probability for adolescent (15-19 years) to work (1)

$1-p$ = probability of adolescent (15-19 years) not to work (0)

ref = Reference variable

The independent variables considered are:

Social group: Scheduled Tribe (ref.); Scheduled Caste, Other Backward Caste and Others

Religion: Hinduism (ref.); Islam; and Others

Educational Attainment: Illiterate (ref.); informally educated, primary and middle; and secondary and above

Type of household: Self-employed (ref.); regular salaried; and casual labour

Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure Quartile Class: Quartile 1 (ref.); Quartile 2; Quartile 3; and Quartile 4. Please note that Quartile 1 denotes the poorest 25 percent of urban population, while Quartile 4 represents the richest 25 percent of urban population.

Further, to examine the sectoral distribution of adolescent workers, they are classified into sectors based on National Industrial Classification (NIC), 2008. While cross-classifications cover all broad industry types in the NIC, the analysis focuses on the three sectors employing the most adolescent workers (due to limited sample).

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Status of Adolescents in Urban India

As per PLFS 2017-18, adolescent population aged 15-19 years constituted 9.5 per cent of urban population which declined to 8.6 per cent in 2023-24. This aligns with the projected population trend of the country highlighted in the introductory section.

Within the age-group of 15-19 years, the worker population ratio (WPR) of the adolescents increased marginally from 10.2 per cent (2017-18) to 11.9 per cent (2023-24). Further disaggregation by age-group shows clearer pattern: work participation rate for 15-17 years remained stable at around 6 per cent during 2017-18 to 2023-24, while increase is concentrated among 18-19 years old, where individuals attain adulthood and face fewer work restrictions. This trend is consistent with the larger scenario – where the PLFS data showing rising urban work participation over the years. As expected, boy's work participation rate exceeds those of the girls in both age-groups.

Table 1: Usual Status of Adolescents in Urban India

Usual Status	2017-18			2023-24		
	Persons	Boys	Girls	Persons	Boys	Girls
1. Worker population Ratio	10.3	16.0	3.8	11.9	20.7	6.0
a. 15-17 years	6.3	9.6	2.7	6.6	10.3	3.5
b. 18-19 years	15.4	24.4	5.1	19.6	40.3	9.8
2. Seeking work (15-19 years)	3.6	6.0	1.0	1.9	2.7	0.8
3. Attending education institutes (15-19 years)	75.6	75.0	76.4	79.5	78.2	81.0
4. Neither employed, nor attending education institutes	10.5	3.0	18.8	6.8	2.3	12.2
Total (1+2+3+4)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Computed from Unit Level Data of PLFS, 2017-18 and 2023-24

The study has attempted to understand the scale of 'nowhere' adolescents i.e. those neither employed nor attending educational institutes. These adolescents comprised about to one-tenth of the adolescents in 2017-18, with their share declining somewhat in 2023-24 (Table 1).

The study noted that the proportion of 'nowhere' adolescents are far prevalent among girls in urban India, where many are engaged in domestic duties as well as engaged in free collection of goods (11.5%). The mean age of these nowhere adolescent girls is 17.6 years and as many as 22 per cent of them are married during 2023-24. More than 70 per cent of these girls belongs to Scheduled Caste or Other Backward Class combined, highlighting multiple vulnerabilities. The average monthly per-capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) of these adolescent girls stood at 2675.39 INR, compared to of 3708.0 INR for all urban adolescent girls. This suggests socio-economic marginalisation drives these girls out of education toward

household duties - freeing other family members to work or an early marriage to lessen the family burden (Singh and Vennam, 2016).

Beyond these trends, data reveals that over than three-fourth of the adolescents attended educational institutes in 2017-18, with their share rising further in 2023-24. It is worth mentioning that, girls attending schools slightly exceeds that of boys, which is probably an outcome of several adolescent -centric schemes implemented nationwide, particularly for girls.

4.2 Socio-economic Attributes Impacting Adolescent Work

Table 2: Work Participation Rate of Adolescents by Social and Demographic Status

Social Group	2017-18	2023-24	Religion	2017-18	2023-24	Education Attained	2017-18	2023-24
Scheduled Tribe	14.6	14.9	Hinduism	9.0	10.6	Not Literate	46.1	47.2
Scheduled Caste	12.6	12.4	Islam	16.6	18.5	Informally Literate, Primary and Middle	16.2	20.0
Other Backward Caste	10.1	12.0	Others	5.3	6.3	Secondary and above	5.1	7.1
Others	8.8	10.9	India Urban	10.2	11.9	All India Urban	10.2	11.9
India Urban	10.2	11.9						

Source: Computed from Unit Level Data of PLFS, 2017-18 and 2023-24

A descriptive analysis suggests that adolescents from marginalised groups (Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Caste) exhibit higher work participation rate than those from general (others) category in 2017-18, a pattern remained unchanged over time. By religious affiliations, Muslim adolescents show higher work participation rate as compared to Hindus and Others in 2017-18, with marginal increase across years.

Educational attainment yields notable findings: work participation rate of illiterate adolescents is much higher among the illiterates. This is followed by those with informal education and educated till primary and middle - as expected for 15-19 years of age-group who are assumed to be out of school and entering workforce. Although, rising slightly from 2017-18 to 2023-24, work participation rate remains much lower for adolescents with to secondary and above education (Table 2).

Table 3: Work Participation Rate of Adolescents by Economic Status

Household Type	2017-18	2023-24	Monthly Per Capita Quartile Class	2017-18	2023-24
Self-employed	9.4	12.5	Quartile 1	13.6	15.7
Regular salaried	10.6	11.7	Quartile 2	12.2	13.0
Casual Labour	11.2	11.0	Quartile 3	8.0	10.1
All India Urban	10.2	11.9	Quartile 4	5.5	7.2

		All India Urban	10.3	11.9
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Source: Computed from Unit Level Data of PLFS, 2017-18 and 2023-24

The study also examines the relationship between adolescent labour market participation in economic setting. It finds that adolescent worker population ratio is highest among poor (Quartile 1) and declines steadily with an increase of quartile class, indicating poverty drives adolescent into labour market.

This pattern is further reinforced by the fact that adolescents from casual labour households show higher WPR - particularly in 2017-18 as compared to those from self-employed or regular salaried. By 2023-24, however highest WPR shifts to self-employed households, likely reflecting invisible labour deployment by family firms in urban settings (NIUA, 2020).

4.3 Interrelationship between Adolescent Work and Socio-demographic and Economic Factors

To corroborate the descriptive findings statistically, precisely the determinants influencing the labour market participation of the adolescents' logistic regression has been employed. The probability of an adolescent working has been considered as a dependent variable, while affiliation to social and religious group, educational attainment, household type and MPCE have been considered as independent variables. The regression estimates the odds ratios, indicating how the likelihood of adolescent work varies across these factors, along with the corresponding upper and lower confidence bounds for each estimate. The significance level has been looked at 0.01% (Table 4).

Table 4: Logistic Regression Showing Relationship between Adolescent Work and Socio-demographic and Economic Factors

	2017-18			2023-24		
	Odds Ratio (Exp. B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)		Odds Ratio (Exp. B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
Independent Variables		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper
Social Group						
Scheduled Tribe	ref.			Ref.		
Scheduled Caste	1.739**	1.318	2.295	1.271	.978	1.650
Other Backward Caste	1.447	1.110	1.885	1.009	.787	1.295
General	1.204	.920	1.575	.934	.724	1.205
Religious Group						
Hinduism	ref.			ref.		
Islam	1.604**	1.405	1.831	1.498**	1.320	1.700
Others	.583**	.443	.768	.423**	.321	.556
Educational Attainment						
Illiterate	ref.			ref.		
Informally educated, Primary and Middle	.281**	.221	.358	.336**	.245	.461
Secondary and above	.111**	.087	.141	.146**	.106	.200

	2017-18			2023-24		
	Odds Ratio (Exp. B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)		Odds Ratio (Exp. B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
Household Type						
Self-employed	ref.			ref.		
Regular salaried	1.291**	1.137	1.466	1.079	.960	1.212
Casual Labour	1.141	.985	1.323	.980	.848	1.134
Quartile Class						
Quartile 1	ref.			ref.		
Quartile 2	1.134	.991	1.297	.964	.847	1.098
Quartile 3	.810	.694	.947	.877	.759	1.012
Quartile 4	.570**	.469	.692	.652**	.545	.779
Constant	.311			.574		

Source: Calculated from Unit level data of PLFS, 2017-18 and 2023-24

Dependent Variable: Whether an adolescent is a worker or not (0=non-workers; 1= workers)

** Significant at 0.01

Social Group: The regression shows that the likelihood of labour market participation among adolescent is 1.7 times higher for Scheduled Caste adolescents as compared to Scheduled Tribe adolescents in 2017-18. Results for other cases are not statistically significant.

Religion: The likelihood of Muslim adolescents to work is 1.6 times and 1.5 times higher than that of their Hindu counterparts in 2017-18 and 2023-24, respectively. On the other hand, adolescent belonging to other religious communities show lower possibility of entering labour marker as compared to Hindus. For example, the probability of entering labour market for other religious group is about 42 per cent less than that of Hindus in 2017-18, which further declined to 58 per cent in 2023-24.

Educational Attainment: The regression shows that, as expected, the probability of adolescent working declines with higher educational attainments. Specifically, the probability of adolescents working is 72 per cent and 89 per cent lower with attainment of education up to middle level and with secondary and higher education, respectively in 2017-18. The corresponding figures for 2023-24 are 67 per cent and 86 per cent, respectively.

Household Type: In 2017-18, the probability of regular salaried households having their adolescents to work is 1.3 times higher than the self-employed households, which does not corroborate the descriptive statistics.

Monthly Per Capita Expenditure: Taking quartile 1 as the reference category, the regression shows that the likelihood of adolescents to work declines by 43 per cent (2017-18) and 35 percent (2023-24) for adolescents in Quartile 4 as compared to Quartile 1.

4.4 Adolescent Workers across Size class of Urban Centres

Cross-tabulation of adolescent labour-market scenario across size-class of urban centres reveals much variation and a mixed pattern. In 2017-18, WPR and LFPR of adolescents were higher in urban centres with population of >1.5 million, whereas they were much lower in smaller order towns and cities with population of <50,000 and 50,000 to <0.3 million. However, the situation changed completely over the years: both WPR and LFPR of the adolescents declined in higher-order cities, while they increased in

small towns and cities. This observation can be explained by the large increase in the proportion of adolescents attending education in the two higher-order city categories, whereas there was a reduction in the proportion of adolescents attending education in small towns. Presence of better education facilities in large cities encourages adolescents to stay in education rather than enter the labour market. In contrast, small towns often have fewer secondary schools and poorer educational facilities, which leads to higher dropout rates and earlier entry into work (Agrawal, 2014). Further, the very nature of economy in large urban areas might require certain level of education and skill to be employed which small towns, however, have more informal and family-based economic activities such as small workshops, retail shops, construction, or household enterprises where adolescents can easily participate as helpers. Informal sectors commonly employ children or adolescents because they provide cheap and flexible labour. Further, large cities have more child labour inspections, presence of grass root level organisations that help to withdraw children from labour market and resettle them in mainstream education. These factors jointly paved the way for reduction of adolescent labour in large size cities (Bobby, 2024; Suman, 2024) (Table 5).

Table 5: Status of Adolescents by Size Class of Urban Centres in India

City-size	WPR		LFPR		Attending education		Neither employed, nor attending education institutes	
	2017-18	2023-24	2017-18	2023-24	2017-18	2023-24	2017-18	2023-24
<50,000	9.0	14.0	12.9	16.2	77.7	76.1	9.4	7.8
50,000 to <0.3 million	8.6	10.5	12.1	12.6	77.5	80.1	10.4	7.3
0.3 - <1.5 million	11.8	10.9	15.2	12.6	74.7	80.9	10.1	6.5
>1.5 million	13.1	11.5	16.5	12.9	70.8	82.0	12.7	5.1
Urban India	10.2	11.9	13.9	13.7	75.6	79.5	10.5	6.8

Source: Calculated from Unit level data of PLFS, 2017-18 and 2023-24

4.4.1 Adolescents by Type of Work

A closer look at the type of work performed by adolescents reveals interesting insights. At all India level, there has been an increase of self-employment among the adolescents, accompanied by a simultaneous decline in regular salaried jobs and casual labour. Cities of different size classes show considerable variation in this regard.

Classification of workers by type of work across the size-classes of urban centres shows that regular salaried workers were highest in the lowest-order towns (<50,000 and 50,000 to <0.3 million) in 2017–18. However, the situation changed by 2023–24, with regular salaried jobs increasing the most in cities with populations of >1.5 million and above.

Self-employment as a source of employment has increased over the years, with adolescents mostly engaged as unpaid helpers to family enterprises (2017-18: 18.2%; 2023-24: 24.5%). An analysis across size-class cities shows that only 20-30 per cent of the adolescent labour were self-employed in lower order towns/cities (<50,000 and 50,000 to < 0.3 million), while they were more numerous in higher order cities

(>1.5 million) in 2017-18. However, this pattern has changed over the years. At present, the centre of self-employment has shifted towards small towns, where a larger share of adolescents is self-employed, mostly as unpaid helpers in family businesses.

Casual wage work as a form of employment declined marginally among the adolescent workers. The study shows that, similar to self-employment, casualization of work has shifted towards smaller towns/cities (<50,000) in 2023-24 from 2017-18 while it has declined in larger cities (<0.3 million - <1.5 million and >1.5 million +).

Table 6: Adolescents by Type of Work across Size Class of Urban Centres in India

	2017-18				
	<50,000	50,000 to <0.3 million	0.3 million - <1.5 million	>1.5 million+	Total
Self-employed	20.5	32.3	30.0	37.7	29.5
Regular salaried	57.4	46.2	41.6	42.4	47.9
Casual labour	22.1	21.4	28.4	19.9	22.6
All India (Urban)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	2023-24				
Self-employed	41.2	38.2	29.1	30.1	35.7
Regular salaried	31.5	40.2	50.6	57.7	42.9
Casual labour	27.3	21.6	20.3	12.2	21.4
All India (Urban)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Calculated from Unit level data of PLFS, 2017-18 and 2023-24

While the overall employment and unemployment indicators provide a general picture of adolescent employment, it is important to explore the specific forms of employment in which adolescents are engaged (Table 6).

Table 7: Adolescent Workers by Sectors of Work Across Size-Class Urban Centres

2017-18									
All India Urban		<50,000		50,000 to <0.3 million		0.3 million - <1.5 million		>1.5 million+	
M	36.9	M	42.5	WS	30.7	M	39.5	M	38.9
WS	26.5	WS	24.3	M	22.1	WS	23.3	WS	28.4
C	10.4	C	9.0	C	13.0	C	12.8	AC	8.5
Others	26.2	Others	24.2	Others	34.2	Others	24.4	Others	24.2
Total	100.0	Total	100.0	Total	100.0		100.0	Total	100.0
2023-24									
M	30.1	WS	23.7	M	31.6	M	35.3	M	36.5
WS	25.4	M	22.4	WS	31.5	WS	24.0	WS	23.1

C	13.2	C	18.6	C	10.4	C	14.1	AC	15.3
Others	31.3	Others	35.3	Others	26.5	Others	26.6	Others	25.1
Total	100.0	Total	100.0	Total	100.0	Total	100.0	Total	100.0

Source: Calculated from Unit level data of PLFS, 2017-18 and 2023-24

Note: M: Manufacturing; WS: Wholesale and retail trade; C: Construction; AC: Accommodation and food services

Table 7 highlights clear trends: firstly, the manufacturing, whole-sale retail trade (including repair of motor vehicles), and construction sectors are the prime sectors employing nearly three-fourth of the adolescents in India during both time-period under consideration.

Secondly, over the years (from 2017-18 to 2023-24), the share of adolescents engaged in manufacturing declined; the share in whole sale and retail trade has remained almost constant, and the share employed in the construction sector has increased.

Thirdly, while the above mentioned sectors employ majority of the adolescent workers in three size-class cities (<50,000; 50,000 - <0.3 million; 0.3 million - <1.5 million); in the higher order cities (>1.5 million), services related to accommodation and food employ about 8 per cent of the workers in 2017-18, which further increased to 15 per cent in 2023-24.

5. Conclusion

This paper makes a modest attempt to understand the present labour market scenario of adolescents in urban India, focusing on the age group of 15–19 years. This age group is particularly important because the legal restrictions on child and adolescent labour begin to ease, and many young individuals enter a transitional phase between schooling and the labour market. It is also a critical stage for adolescents from poor and marginalised backgrounds, who face a high risk of dropping out of school. One of the key reasons for this is the cessation of free and compulsory education guaranteed under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, which provides universal education only up to the age of 14 years. Once adolescents cross this threshold, economic pressures and limited access to continued education often push them towards labour market participation.

The study finds that the work participation of adolescents has increased, particularly in the 18–19 age group, a stage when individuals transition into legal adulthood between 2017-18 and 2023-24. Reflecting the persistent gender norms in Indian society where men are often viewed as the primary breadwinners, adolescent boys exhibit significantly higher work participation rates compared to girls. However, this does not place girls in a safer or more favourable position. A large proportion of adolescent girls remain outside both the education system and the labour market. Many of them fall into the category of “neither in education nor employment,” and a considerable share - approximately one-fourth are already married during adolescence.

The analysis also highlights that socio-economic marginalisation and low or negligible levels of education are the major drivers of adolescent labour in India. This relationship is evident both descriptively and statistically. Adolescents belonging to economically disadvantaged households and socially marginalised groups are significantly more likely to participate in the labour market at an early age, often at the cost of their educational attainment and long-term human capital development.

Another important contribution of the study is its examination of how adolescent labour participation varies across different size-classes of urban centres. Large cities with populations exceeding 1.5 million, which attracted a substantial number of adolescent workers in 2017–18, have experienced a decline in adolescent work participation by 2023-24. In contrast, smaller towns and cities have witnessed an increase in adolescent labour participation. This shift suggests that larger urban centres, despite offering greater employment opportunities, also provide stronger institutional environments that discourage adolescent labour. The presence of a larger number of educational institutions, better enforcement and monitoring of labour laws, and the active role of grassroots organisations appear to have contributed to withdrawing adolescents from the labour market and redirecting them towards mainstream education.

Finally, the study concludes that although India has enacted several laws to curb child labour - prohibiting employment of children below 14 years and restricting adolescents aged 15-17 years from working in hazardous industries, vulnerabilities persist beyond these age thresholds. The age group of 18-19 years, which lies outside the protective ambit of child labour legislation, remains particularly exposed to labour market pressures. Evidence from the study indicates that labour participation among this group has increased in recent years. Therefore, policy interventions must extend beyond the conventional child labour framework and focus on strengthening post-14 educational access, skill development opportunities, and social protection mechanisms to ensure a smoother transition from adolescence to productive adulthood.

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