

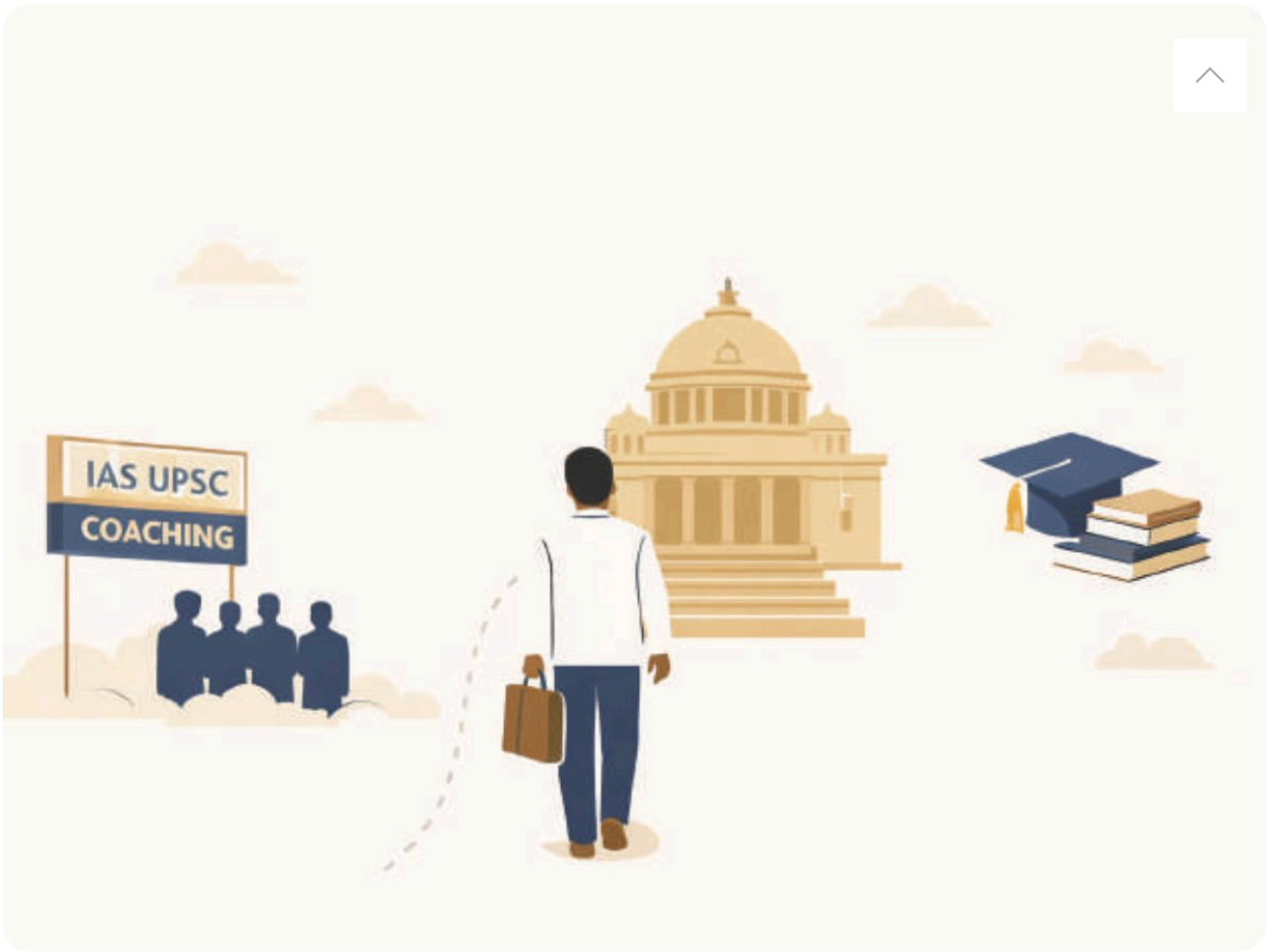


# The Government Job Obsession: A Paranoia, A Mirage

India's obsession with government jobs reveals deeper anxieties about status, security and social validation.

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India is, by most measures, a country of extraordinary religious traditions. It has produced more deities, more sects, more competing theologies than perhaps any civilisation in recorded history. But running quietly beneath all of them, cutting across caste and region and education level, is a faith that goes largely unexamined because it does not announce itself as faith at all. It presents itself as common sense, as ambition, as a parent's love for a child's future. Its name is the 'government job'. In the northern heartland especially, it operates with all the architecture of a fully developed religion: its own temples, its own priests, its own scripture, its own promise of heaven, and its own demand for years of tapasya before that heaven can be entered.

This past week offered three illustrations of that faith at its most unguarded. When the UPSC Civil Services results were declared on March 6, a young man from Sheikhpura, Bihar announced he had secured Rank 440. The village celebrated, a former MLA arrived with gifts, and the local SHO invited him to the police station and fed him sweets, calculating that a future IAS officer worth cultivating deserved early investment. It soon came out that the actual Rank 440 belonged not to this man from Bihar but his namesake from

Karnataka. After the fraud emerged, the same SHO who had honoured the young man is now searching for him. Similar cases emerged elsewhere as well. In Bulandshahr, a young woman claimed Rank 113, her grandfather wept on camera, the cameras arrived, and investigation confirmed she had not even cleared the Mains. In Arrah, Bihar, a family celebrated a daughter's Rank 301 before UPSC confirmed the rank belonged to a different candidate in Uttar Pradesh entirely.

Three cases, one result cycle, the same script each time. Before the roll number is verified, before a single document is checked, the garlands appear, the sweets are distributed, and the politicians come to be photographed. The question worth pausing over is not administrative. It is psychological: what kind of hunger produces this, the tears, the crowds, the motivational speeches, before anyone has confirmed the fact? What is it that is actually being celebrated?

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### **The Economy of Desperation**

The first cause is real and must be named honestly before it is complicated. Where private industry has not reached, where the land parcels are too small and the nearest real employment is hours away, the government job is not a preference, it becomes the only visible horizon. A young person from such a place does not choose it over other options; he chooses it because no other option has presented itself. The indictment falls first on economic policy and the decades-long failure to build conditions where enterprise is possible outside the state's reach.

The geography of the craze makes this plain. Travel to Gujarat, to Mumbai, to Bengal and the coaching centre hoardings that paper every wall in Mukherjee Nagar or Prayagrah are simply not there. Nobody goes to Gurgaon for UPSC preparation. The obsession tracks underdevelopment with almost statistical precision: the more economically marginalised the region, the tighter the coaching mafia's grip, the more completely the government job has colonised the imagination of its young people.

And yet this cause reaches its limit almost immediately. If economic desperation alone explained the craze, equal entrepreneurial energy should appear in the same underdeveloped regions, since an area where nothing yet exists is also an area where everything remains to be built. The fact that this almost never registers as a possibility, that the mind moves directly from need to the government office without pausing at enterprise, tells us the cause runs deeper than economics.

### The Machinery of Manufactured Choicelessness

Into that gap steps a vast industry whose commercial survival depends on deepening the conviction that the aspirant has no other option. But the industry does not create this conviction from nothing; it finds it already installed, placed there by the family and the social circle long before any coaching centre advertisement appears.

The question that greets a young person who considers any path outside the government office, asked in drawing rooms and at family gatherings across the Hindi heartland, is not curious but dismissive: "Private mein karoge kya?" (What will you do in the private sector?) The tone carries the answer within it. Private employment is treated as something marginal, precarious, beneath serious consideration, not because the family has examined the evidence but because the government job's superiority has been absorbed as common sense across generations. The coaching centres of Mukherjee Nagar and Rajendra Nagar are the temples of this parallel religion, the celebrity teachers its priests, the years of preparation its prescribed austerity. But the worshipper arrives already converted. The family did that work first.

The numbers alone should be sufficient to break the spell. In 2012, approximately five lakh candidates applied for the civil services examination. By 2022, that number had crossed eleven lakh. The country's population did not double, what doubled was manufactured aspiration, seeded through advertising and amplified through social media by an industry that profits from the dreamer's continued presence and is structurally incentivised to keep him convinced that this is the only door. Of every hundred seats on offer, perhaps a

hundred thousand candidates apply. The coaching industry displays the one winner; the ninety-nine who are broken by the process remain invisible. This is not inspiration. It is almost a lottery dressed as meritocracy, and the house always wins.

What makes this machinery particularly effective is that it finds its subjects already converted. By the time a young aspirant is old enough to question the direction he has been pointed in, he has already invested years, and the sunk cost holds him in place.

### The 'Sahib' Inside

Strip away the economic argument and dismantle the coaching machinery, and something remains that no policy can reach, because it lives in the unexamined interior. Return to Sheikhpura: the illuminating detail is not that the young man lied. It is that the SHO fed him sweets and the MLA arrived with gifts, neither calculating what he would do as an officer, but what proximity to that becoming might yield. The government job is not imagined as a site of work. It is imagined as an arrival, the moment when the one who was overlooked becomes the one before whom others yield. Chhaa jaana, as it is said in the villages and towns where this hunger runs deepest: to overshadow, to finally land in the imagination of everyone who once dismissed you.

The proof arrives almost immediately after selection. Officers who clear the examination often begin, within days, making videos for social media: stopping small shopkeepers midwork to serve as props, commanding spaces to fall quiet, performing the authority before they have exercised it once in any official capacity. The performance precedes the work because the performance was almost always the point. Service was the stated reason; arrival was the real one.

This hunger is not merely about power in any abstract sense. It is specific, personal, and rooted in the incompleteness that the ego is. A young man prepares for seven years not because he wants to manage districts but because he wants a certain woman's family to stop looking past him, because the girl who will not consider a match without the 'sarkari stamp' represents an entire social world whose validation he needs in order to feel real. And the fantasy operates at every level of the hierarchy, not only at the top. A man newly appointed to a Group D post, a peonlevel position, walks differently at the family wedding. His gait changes. People receive him differently. The word 'sahi'b does not wait for the IAS; it begins much lower, and the hunger it represents begins lower still.

The posting is not sought for what it enables one to do. It is sought for what it enables one to become in the eyes of those whose eyes have always mattered.

Underneath this lies the deepest cultural disease: the conviction that life is something to be made comfortable rather than something to be engaged with fully. The government job is the institutional expression of this conviction at its most refined. It promises permanence without continued performance, a fixed salary regardless of what the work produces, a designation that confers dignity independent of whether the work is done with any care. The ego reaches for it because it promises exactly what the ego always seeks: a settled identity, a fixed address in the social order, a form of being that does not require daily renewal.

The posting is sought, obtained, and found wanting, and then a better posting is sought, because the one who was seeking has not changed. The word *sahib* in the Indian social register does not merely denote a supervisor. It denotes a person before whom one must reduce oneself, and the hunger to be called by it is the hunger to stop reducing and to be, at last, enlarged. That hunger is the root, and it will not be satisfied by any posting, because no posting can fill what no object has ever filled, because the emptiness being reached for is not a gap in circumstance but the ego's own definition.

All three causes must be addressed, and none is sufficient alone. But correct the first two without touching the third, and the hunger simply migrates, finding another hierarchy to enter, another system of deference to exploit. The harder question is not administrative. It is the one each of us must ask while watching those three celebrations collapse in real time: what in me also waits for a title, a designation, an external verdict, before it will agree that my life has begun? That question, if asked honestly, does not produce an answer. It produces discomfort. And the discomfort is the beginning of the only inquiry that matters.

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