



Labour Market Dynamics in India's Million-Plus Cities: Evidence from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2025

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ABSTRACT

This study examines labour market dynamics in India's 46 million-plus cities using the newly released city-level estimates derived from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2025, published by the National Statistics Office (NSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, alongside comparative Annual Report data for the January-December 2025 reference period. Since 2025, PLFS has separated each million-plus city into an independent sampling stratum, permitting for the first time a systematic assessment of large-city labour outcomes relative to other urban India. The paper traces the trajectory of the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Worker Population Ratio (WPR), and Unemployment Rate (UR) for the population aged 15 years and above across the period 2017-18 to 2025, and situates the findings within the broader literature on jobless growth, urban informality, and gendered labour force withdrawal in India. The results indicate a sustained rise in LFPR and WPR in million-plus cities, led disproportionately by an expansion in female participation, together with a marked decline in the unemployment rate. Million-plus cities are shown to possess a labour market structurally distinct from the rest of urban India, characterised by a substantially higher share of regular wage/salaried employment, lower reliance on casual labour, higher

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nominal earnings across all employment categories, and a comparatively lower proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET). At the same time, persistent gender asymmetries in participation and in the reasons cited for labour force withdrawal point to continuing structural constraints. The paper concludes with implications for urban employment policy, skilling infrastructure, and care-economy investment in India's largest cities.

1. Introduction

Urban India's largest cities occupy a disproportionate share of the country's non-agricultural output, formal employment, and enterprise activity, yet until recently the statistical apparatus of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) did not permit disaggregated, city-level analysis of labour market outcomes. The redesign of PLFS from January 2025, which shifted the survey reference period from the earlier July-June agricultural year to the calendar year and treated each million-plus city as an independent sampling stratum, has for the first time allowed the National Statistics Office (NSO) to publish reliable, city-specific estimates of labour force participation, employment, and unemployment (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2026a, 2026b). The resulting report, *Labour Market Dynamics in Million-Plus Cities*, released jointly with a companion report on unincorporated enterprises, offers a granular window into the employment structure of 46 cities that, as per Census 2011 definitions, each carry a population exceeding one million (NSO, 2026a).

Cities have historically been framed in Indian development discourse as engines of structural transformation, expected to absorb surplus agricultural labour into higher-productivity manufacturing and service activity. Yet decades of research on India's growth experience have questioned whether urban and industrial expansion has translated into commensurate employment generation, giving rise to a long-standing debate on "jobless growth" in organised manufacturing and beyond (Bhalotra, 1998; Kannan & Raveendran, 2009). Parallel to this debate, scholars have documented the persistence and even deepening of informality in Indian urban labour markets, alongside segmented, dualistic structures in which formal, protected employment coexists with a much larger, poorly remunerated informal periphery (Maloney, 1999; Mazumdar, 1983; Mehrotra, Gandhi, Saha, & Sahoo, 2014). A further strand of literature has drawn attention to the puzzle of stagnant or declining female labour force participation in urban India even amid rising education levels and falling fertility, a pattern that runs counter to conventional U-shaped feminisation hypotheses (Klasen & Pieters, 2015; Mehrotra & Parida, 2017).

The release of city-level PLFS 2025 estimates offers an opportunity to revisit these debates with a sharper geographic lens. Rather than treating "urban India" as an undifferentiated category, the new data allow million-plus cities to be examined as a distinct labour market segment, compared against the residual category of smaller urban areas. This distinction matters because million-plus cities differ systematically from smaller towns in industrial composition, formal-sector density, infrastructure, and connectivity, and may therefore exhibit different employment trajectories, wage structures, and gender dynamics. This paper draws on the NSO's Labour Market Dynamics in Million-Plus Cities report and the PLFS Annual Report 2025 to document these differences and to interpret them against the existing literature on Indian urban labour markets.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Jobless Growth and Structural Transformation

The proposition that Indian economic growth since liberalisation has been insufficiently employment-intensive has been examined extensively in the literature. Bhalotra (1998) identified an early puzzle of jobless growth in Indian manufacturing in which output expansion was not matched by proportionate employment gains, a finding echoed and extended by Kannan and Raveendran (2009), who documented a quarter-century of jobless growth in India's organised manufacturing sector using employment elasticity measures. These studies collectively suggest that capital-intensive growth paths, rather than labour-absorbing industrialisation, have characterised much of India's post-reform trajectory, with implications for the capacity of cities to generate adequate formal employment for an expanding urban workforce.

2.2 Informality and Labour Market Segmentation

A second strand of literature concerns the segmented and dualistic character of urban labour markets in developing economies. Mazumdar (1983) provided an early theorisation of segmented labour markets in low- and middle-income countries, distinguishing a protected formal segment from an unprotected informal periphery characterised by lower earnings and weaker job security. Maloney (1999), examining Mexican evidence, questioned the rigidity of this segmentation, arguing that informal employment can, for some workers, represent a voluntary and even preferred choice rather than a residual outcome of formal-sector rationing. In the Indian context, Mehrotra, Gandhi, Saha, and Sahoo (2014) examined the joint dynamics of joblessness and informalisation between 2004-05 and 2009-10 and found that employment growth during this period was accompanied by a rise in informal employment arrangements even within formally



registered enterprises. Bhattacharya and Kesar (2020) extended this analysis conceptually, arguing that India's informal economy is not a single undifferentiated space but comprises analytically distinct segments—non-capitalist petty commodity production, subcontracted petty production, and informal wage labour—each with different implications for capitalist development and worker precarity. These perspectives collectively caution against treating "informality" as a monolithic category when assessing urban employment quality.

2.3 Caste, Discrimination, and Urban Labour Market Access

Beyond aggregate informality, the literature has also examined how social identity structures access to urban labour markets. Madheswaran and Attewell (2007), using National Sample Survey data, documented significant caste-based earnings and employment-access disparities in Indian urban labour markets even after controlling for education and other observable characteristics, pointing to persistent discriminatory segmentation alongside economic dualism.

2.4 Female Labour Force Participation

A substantial body of research has grappled with the stagnation, and in some periods decline, of female labour force participation in urban India. Klasen and Pieters (2015) examined this stagnation using decomposition methods and attributed it to a combination of rising household incomes reducing the economic necessity of female work, rising education levels altering reservation wages, and a narrow set of employment opportunities considered socially acceptable for women, particularly in urban settings. Mehrotra and Parida (2017) similarly investigated the decline in women's labour force participation in India, emphasising the role of increased engagement in domestic duties and educational enrolment as competing claims on women's time. Kannan and Raveendran (2012) had earlier drawn attention to the phenomenon of a "missing labour force" among women, arguing that low measured participation partly reflects discouraged withdrawal rather than a genuine absence of labour supply. These findings are directly relevant to interpreting the reasons cited for non-participation in the PLFS 2025 city-level data, discussed later in this paper.

2.5 Wages, Working Conditions, and the Urban Labour Market

The International Labour Organization's India Wage Report (ILO, 2018) documented substantial wage disparities across employment categories, gender, and geography in India, and called for stronger minimum wage enforcement and social protection extension as instruments for improving job quality. This concern with earnings differentials by employment status is echoed in the PLFS 2025 million-plus city

estimates, which report a nominal earnings premium in large cities across self-employment, regular salaried work, and casual labour categories relative to urban India as a whole (NSO, 2026a).

3. Research Gap and Objectives of the Study

Much of the existing literature on Indian urban labour markets has been constrained by the absence of city-disaggregated official survey data, relying instead on state-level or broad rural-urban comparisons, or on Census and enterprise survey data that do not capture the full range of PLFS labour force indicators. The introduction of city-level strata for 46 million-plus cities under PLFS 2025 addresses this data gap for the first time and permits an empirical assessment of whether India's largest cities constitute a distinct labour market segment. Against this background, the present study pursues the following objectives:

- (i) To examine the trend in Labour Force Participation Rate, Worker Population Ratio, and Unemployment Rate in India's million-plus cities over the period 2017-18 to 2025, disaggregated by sex.
- (ii) To compare labour market outcomes in million-plus cities against other urban areas of India on indicators of employment status, sectoral composition, and earnings.
- (iii) To assess gender-differentiated patterns of labour force participation and non-participation, and the incidence of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET), in million-plus cities.
- (iv) To interpret these findings within the theoretical frameworks of jobless growth, labour market segmentation, and gendered urban labour supply developed in the existing literature, and to draw out policy implications.

4. Data Source and Methodology

This study is based on secondary data drawn from two official publications of the National Statistics Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India: the report Labour Market Dynamics in Million-Plus Cities (NSO, 2026a), released on 29 June 2026, and the Periodic Labour Force Survey Annual Report, 2025, covering the calendar year January-December 2025 (NSO, 2026b). Both surveys follow a stratified multi-stage sampling design in which the First Stage Units comprise Urban Frame Survey blocks in urban areas, with households surveyed as Ultimate Stage Units through Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing. Under the revised design, each of the 46 million-plus cities defined per Census 2011 (cities with a population of ten lakh or more) constitutes an independent sampling stratum, distinct from the residual category of "other urban areas." The million-plus city estimates for 2025 are based on a first-visit sample of 60,843 persons aged 15 years and above across 19,541 households, drawn from

1,630 First Stage Units, out of a total urban India sample of 3,95,080 persons aged 15 years and above (NSO, 2026a).

The analysis relies on three principal labour market indicators computed under Usual Status (Principal Status plus Subsidiary Status, ps+ss): the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), defined as the proportion of the population that is either employed or actively seeking and available for work; the Worker Population Ratio (WPR), defined as the proportion of the population that is employed; and the Unemployment Rate (UR), defined as the proportion of the labour force that is unemployed. Where relevant, Current Weekly Status (CWS) estimates, based on a seven-day reference period, are also reported to capture employment status composition. The study adopts a descriptive-comparative methodology, tabulating and interpreting officially published estimates rather than conducting primary micro-data analysis, and situates the observed trends within the theoretical literature reviewed in Section 2. As secondary survey-based estimates, the figures reported here are subject to sampling variability; the source reports provide Relative Standard Errors and confidence intervals for city-level use, which should be consulted before disaggregating findings to the level of individual cities (NSO, 2026a).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Trends in Labour Force Participation, 2017-18 to 2025

Table 1 presents the trend in LFPR, WPR, and UR (in usual status, ps+ss) for persons aged 15 years and above in million-plus cities between 2017-18 and 2025. The overall LFPR rose from 47.7% in 2017-18 to 52.4% in 2025, an increase of 4.7 percentage points, indicating a sustained strengthening of labour market engagement in large urban centres over this period (NSO, 2026a). Male LFPR remained consistently high throughout, rising moderately from 74.2% to 75.9%, with a brief dip in 2018-19 followed by steady recovery. Female LFPR recorded the most pronounced improvement, rising from 19.8% in 2017-18 to 27.2% in 2025, a gain of 7.4 percentage points that considerably outpaced the male increase of 1.7 percentage points.

Table 1

LFPR, WPR, and UR (Usual Status, ps+ss) in Million-Plus Cities, Persons Aged 15+ Years, 2017-18 to 2025 (%)

Year	LFPR	LFPR	LFPR	WPR	WPR	WPR	UR	UR (F)	UR (P)
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	(M)	(F)	(P)	(M)	(F)	(P)	(M)		
2017-18	74.2	19.8	47.7	68.6	17.9	43.9	7.5	9.4	7.9
2018-19	73.4	20.2	47.9	68.3	18.1	44.2	7.0	10.4	7.7
2019-20	74.3	23.6	49.9	69.6	21.7	46.5	6.4	8.0	6.7
2020-21	74.6	22.4	49.3	70.1	20.4	46.0	6.1	9.0	6.7
2021-22	74.9	23.8	50.4	70.9	22.0	47.5	5.3	7.8	5.8
2025	75.9	27.2	52.4	72.6	25.5	49.8	4.5	6.1	4.9

Note. M = male; F = female; P = person. LFPR = Labour Force Participation Rate; WPR = Worker Population Ratio; UR = Unemployment Rate. Adapted from Labour Market Dynamics in Million-Plus Cities (NSO, 2026a).

This pattern is consistent with the broader literature's emphasis on gendered dynamics as the primary margin of adjustment in Indian urban labour supply. Whereas Klasen and Pieters (2015) and Mehrotra and Parida (2017) documented a stagnation or decline in female urban participation through the mid-2010s, the more recent PLFS trajectory suggests a reversal of this pattern in India's largest cities, with female participation rising at more than four times the pace of male participation between 2017-18 and 2025. This may reflect a combination of expanding service-sector opportunities in large cities, improved educational attainment among urban women, and policy attention to women's workforce participation, though the present data cannot establish causal mechanisms.

5.2 Trends in Worker Population Ratio

The Worker Population Ratio in million-plus cities followed a broadly similar trajectory to LFPR, rising from 43.9% in 2017-18 to 49.8% in 2025, a gain of 5.9 percentage points (NSO, 2026a). Male WPR increased moderately from 68.6% to 72.6%, while female WPR rose from 17.9% to 25.5%, a gain of 7.6 percentage points that exceeded the corresponding male increase. The close tracking of WPR and LFPR trends indicates that the expansion in labour force engagement, particularly among women, was largely absorbed into employment rather than translating into a growing pool of job seekers, a pattern that runs counter to the jobless growth thesis at least as it applies to million-plus cities in this period (cf. Bhalotra, 1998; Kannan & Raveendran, 2009).

5.3 Trends in Unemployment

The unemployment rate in million-plus cities declined steadily from 7.9% in 2017-18 to 4.9% in 2025, a reduction of 3.0 percentage points (NSO, 2026a). The decline was driven primarily by falling male unemployment, which more than halved from 7.5% to 4.5% over the period. Female unemployment followed a more volatile path, rising from 9.4% in 2017-18 to a peak of 10.4% in 2018-19 before declining substantially to 6.1% by 2025. The persistence of a gender gap in unemployment—female UR remaining 1.6 percentage points above male UR in 2025 despite the sharper rise in female LFPR—suggests that expanding female labour supply in million-plus cities has not been matched by proportionate demand-side absorption, a finding that resonates with the "missing labour force" framework of Kannan and Raveendran (2012), under which measured unemployment likely understates the true difficulty women face in securing urban employment.

5.4 Million-Plus Cities vis-à-vis Other Urban Areas

Table 2 compares selected labour market indicators for million-plus cities against other (non-million-plus) urban areas of India for 2025. While the headline LFPR, WPR, and UR figures for million-plus cities are only marginally different from those of other urban areas, the underlying employment structure diverges considerably (NSO, 2026a).

Table 2 Comparison of Labour Market Outcomes: Million-Plus Cities vis-à-vis Other Urban Areas, 2025

Indicator	Million-Plus Cities	Other Urban Areas
Labour Force Participation Rate (usual status)	52.4%	52.1%
Worker Population Ratio (usual status)	49.8%	49.6%
Unemployment Rate (usual status)	4.9%	4.7%
Regular wage/salaried employment (CWS)	58.5%	42.9%
Casual labour (CWS)	6.3%	14.4%
Workers in agriculture (usual status, NIC 2008 Sec. A)	1.6%	10.1%
Workers in transport, storage & communication (Sec. H & J)	13.6%	9.2%
Workers in other services (Sec. K-U)	31.5%	24.1%



Note. CWS = Current Weekly Status. Adapted from Labour Market Dynamics in Million-Plus Cities (NSO, 2026a).

Under the Current Weekly Status approach, 58.5% of workers in million-plus cities were engaged in regular wage or salaried employment, compared with 42.9% in other urban areas, while the share of casual labour in million-plus cities, at 6.3%, was less than half the 14.4% recorded in other urban areas. Sectorally, agriculture accounted for only 1.6% of workers in million-plus cities against 10.1% in other urban areas, reflecting the near-complete structural transformation of large-city economies away from primary activity. Workers in transport, storage, and communication, and in other services, were both proportionately more numerous in million-plus cities than in other urban areas (NSO, 2026a). Together, these findings indicate that while participation and unemployment rates converge across city size categories, the quality and formality of employment—measured through the regular-wage share and the sectoral mix—remain systematically more favourable in million-plus cities. This is consistent with segmented labour market theory (Mazumdar, 1983), under which larger urban agglomerations sustain a proportionately larger formal-sector core, while smaller towns rely more heavily on casual and agriculture-adjacent employment.

5.5 Earnings Differentials

Table 3 reports average nominal earnings by employment category for million-plus cities relative to urban India as a whole. Self-employed workers in million-plus cities reported average earnings 34.1% higher than their counterparts in urban India; regular wage/salaried employees earned 9.7% more; and casual labourers earned 13.5% more (NSO, 2026a).

Table 3 Average Nominal Earnings by Employment Category, Million-Plus Cities vis-à-vis Urban India, 2025

Employment Category	Million-Plus Cities (₹)	Urban India (₹)
Self-employed (avg. earnings, last 30 days)	30,858	23,013
Regular salaried employees (avg. earnings, last month)	28,808	26,258
Casual labour (avg. earnings per day)	624	550



Note. Self-employment earnings refer to the last 30 days; regular salaried earnings refer to the last month; casual labour earnings refer to per-day wages. Adapted from Labour Market Dynamics in Million-Plus Cities (NSO, 2026a).

The earnings premium is largest for self-employment, which may reflect the greater density of markets, customers, and business opportunity in large agglomerations, consistent with agglomeration-economy arguments for urban wage premiums. The ILO's India Wage Report (2018) had earlier highlighted substantial geographic and sectoral wage disparities within India's labour market; the million-plus city data extend this observation by showing that the urban wage advantage itself is not uniform across city size, with the largest cities commanding a further premium over the rest of urban India across every employment category examined.

5.6 Youth NEET Status and Reasons for Non-Participation

Million-plus cities recorded a lower proportion of youth aged 15-29 years who were Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET) under usual status—22.2%—compared with 25.0% for urban India as a whole (NSO, 2026a). This gap suggests that the denser educational and employment infrastructure of large cities may afford young people a wider range of engagement options, whether in continued education, training, or work, relative to smaller towns.

The reasons cited for non-participation in the labour force also displayed a marked gender asymmetry. Among males not in the labour force in million-plus cities, 53.5% cited a desire to continue studying as the principal reason, whereas among females, 68.7% cited childcare or personal commitments related to home-making (NSO, 2026a). This asymmetry lends direct empirical support to the arguments of Klasen and Pieters (2015) and Mehrotra and Parida (2017) regarding the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work as a structural constraint on urban women's labour force engagement, even in India's most economically dynamic cities. It suggests that rising female LFPR documented in Section 5.1, while a positive development, has occurred alongside a labour supply constraint for women that remains distinct in kind from that faced by men, whose non-participation is predominantly linked to human capital investment rather than care responsibilities.

5.7 Synthesis: Million-Plus Cities as a Distinct Labour Market Segment

Taken together, the results in Sections 5.1 through 5.6 support the characterisation of India's million-plus cities as a labour market segment that is structurally distinct from, rather than merely a larger version of, the rest of urban India. Aggregate participation and unemployment rates in million-plus cities are close

to those of other urban areas, which might suggest limited differentiation at first glance. However, disaggregation by employment status, sector, and earnings reveals a labour market with a substantially larger formal, regular-wage core, lower reliance on casual and agricultural employment, and a systematic earnings premium across every employment category. This pattern is broadly consistent with segmented labour market theory (Mazumdar, 1983) applied at the level of urban hierarchy rather than solely within a single city, and qualifies the jobless growth thesis (Bhalotra, 1998; Kannan & Raveendran, 2009) by showing that at least in India's largest cities, the 2017-18 to 2025 period was one of employment-absorbing rather than jobless expansion, notwithstanding the persistence of gendered constraints on labour supply.

6. Policy Implications

Several policy implications follow from these findings. First, the sustained rise in female LFPR in million-plus cities, while encouraging, remains constrained by a care burden that continues to fall disproportionately on women, as evidenced by the reasons cited for non-participation. Investment in accessible, affordable childcare and eldercare infrastructure in large cities could plausibly narrow the residual gender gap in participation and unemployment identified in Sections 5.1 and 5.3.

Second, the substantially lower NEET rate in million-plus cities relative to other urban areas suggests that the educational and training infrastructure concentrated in large cities yields measurable benefits for youth engagement. Extending comparable access to vocational training, apprenticeship, and tertiary education in smaller towns could help close this gap and reduce rural-to-million-plus-city migration pressure driven by disparities in youth opportunity.

Third, the higher share of regular wage/salaried employment and lower casual labour share in million-plus cities point to the importance of formal enterprise growth as a driver of employment quality. Given that other urban areas continue to rely far more heavily on casual labour, urban employment policy directed at smaller towns may benefit from measures that support the graduation of informal enterprises into more formal, regular-employment-generating structures, an issue extensively theorised in the informality literature (Maloney, 1999; Mehrotra et al., 2014; Bhattacharya & Kesar, 2020).

Fourth, the persistent earnings premium in million-plus cities across all employment categories, documented in Section 5.5, underscores continuing spatial inequality in India's urban economy. Regional and urban development policy that seeks to build second-tier cities as genuine employment hubs, rather than staging posts for eventual migration to million-plus cities, would need to address this earnings gap directly, potentially through targeted industrial and service-sector investment outside the largest metropolitan centres.



7. Limitations of the Study

This study is based entirely on secondary, officially published aggregate estimates and does not draw on unit-level PLFS micro-data; consequently, it is not possible to conduct multivariate or city-specific econometric analysis, or to control for confounding factors such as migration status, education, or caste at the individual level. The 2025 estimates also mark a break in survey methodology and reference period from earlier PLFS rounds, which introduces some caution in interpreting the reported trend as fully comparable across the entire 2017-18 to 2025 series (NSO, 2026a, 2026b). Finally, as the underlying data are sample-survey based, city-specific estimates are subject to sampling variability, and the source report itself cautions that Relative Standard Errors and confidence intervals should be consulted before drawing firm conclusions about differences between individual cities, a level of disaggregation not undertaken in the present study.

8. Conclusion

This paper has used the first available city-level PLFS estimates for India's 46 million-plus cities to examine labour market dynamics between 2017-18 and 2025. The evidence points to a sustained rise in labour force participation and employment, led disproportionately by women, and a substantial decline in unemployment over this period. Compared with the rest of urban India, million-plus cities exhibit a labour market with a larger formal and regular-wage core, lower reliance on casual and agricultural employment, higher earnings across all employment categories, and a lower incidence of youth NEET status. At the same time, gendered patterns in the reasons for non-participation indicate that unpaid care responsibilities continue to constrain women's labour market engagement even in India's most economically advanced urban centres. These findings extend the existing literature on jobless growth, labour market segmentation, and gendered urban labour supply in India by demonstrating that city size itself functions as a meaningful axis of labour market differentiation, with implications for how urban employment and gender-responsive social infrastructure policy should be designed and targeted across India's urban hierarchy.

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