



Negotiating Masculinity: Unemployment, Identity Crisis and Male Youth in India

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received 16-07-2025
Revised 21-08-2025
Accepted 19-11-2025
Published 30-12-2025

ARTICLE ID

TPAS0302005

KEYWORDS

Masculinity, youth unemployment, gender identity, role strain, social anxiety, hegemonic masculinity, contemporary India.



ABSTRACT

The present study examines the changing meanings of masculinity among unemployed male youth in contemporary India. Drawing on sociological theories of masculinity, anomie, and role strain, the study explores how prolonged unemployment disrupts socially expected male roles related to economic provision, authority, and self-worth. Using qualitative interviews with educated yet unemployed young men from urban and semi-urban settings, the article analyses experiences of frustration, loss of status, emotional distress, and renegotiation of identity. The findings suggest that unemployment produces a crisis not only of livelihood but also of masculine selfhood, leading to coping strategies such as withdrawal, redefinition of success, reliance on family support, and selective resistance to traditional gender norms. At the same time, persistent social pressure to perform hegemonic masculinity deepens anxiety and social isolation. It argues that male unemployment must be understood as a gendered social issue rather than merely an economic problem.



INTRODUCTION

Unemployment among youth has emerged as one of the most pressing social concerns in contemporary India, not merely as an economic problem but as a deeply gendered social experience. For young men, employment is closely tied to socially constructed ideas of masculinity that emphasise economic provision, independence, authority, and self-respect. In Indian society, these expectations are reinforced through family norms, cultural practices, and social institutions, where manhood is often measured through one's ability to earn, support dependants, and achieve upward mobility. When employment remains elusive, young men face not only material insecurity but also a crisis of identity that unsettles their sense of self and social worth. Sociological studies on unemployment have largely focused on issues of poverty, labour markets, and economic policy, while the gendered consequences of joblessness have received relatively limited attention. Masculinity, unlike femininity, is frequently treated as a neutral or invisible category, despite being shaped by power relations and social expectations. In the Indian context, hegemonic masculinity continues to privilege breadwinner roles and emotional restraint, leaving little space for vulnerability or alternative expressions of male identity. As a result, unemployed male youth often experience shame, anxiety, and a perceived loss of status, both within the family and in wider social interactions.¹

Rapid socio-economic changes since economic liberalisation have further intensified this crisis. Expansion of higher education, rising aspirations, and media-driven images of success have created expectations that the labour market has been unable to fulfil. Educated youth, in particular, confront a contradiction between their qualifications and the scarcity of stable employment. This gap between aspiration and reality generates conditions of anomie, where established norms lose their regulating power. For young men socialised to associate adulthood with paid work, unemployment delays social transitions such as marriage and independent household formation, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and dependence. The crisis of masculinity among unemployed male youth is not expressed in uniform ways. Responses range from withdrawal and silence to frustration, anger, and attempts to renegotiate masculine identities. Some young men redefine success by valuing emotional resilience, ethical selfhood, or alternative career paths, while others internalise failure and experience

declining mental well-being. Family support often plays a dual role, offering material security while simultaneously intensifying pressure to conform to traditional masculine roles. Peer networks and digital spaces also influence how young men interpret unemployment, shaping narratives of blame, resistance, or resignation. This article situates youth unemployment within a broader sociological framework that treats masculinity as a socially produced and contested identity rather than a fixed trait. By examining how unemployed male youth negotiate selfhood, dignity, and social expectations, the study seeks to deepen understanding of unemployment as a gendered social phenomenon. It argues that addressing youth unemployment in India requires attention not only to job creation but also to the social meanings attached to work, masculinity, and worth. Such an approach is essential for understanding the emotional and identity-related consequences of unemployment in a rapidly transforming society. The main objectives of this article are:

1. To examine how unemployment shapes masculine identity and self-perception among male youth in contemporary India.
2. To analyse the social and familial pressures experienced by unemployed male youth in relation to traditional gender roles.
3. To explore the coping strategies and identity negotiations adopted by unemployed male youth in response to prolonged joblessness.

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on in-depth interviews with unemployed male youth from urban and semi-urban areas in India. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents, and thematic analysis was employed to interpret narratives related to masculinity, identity, and unemployment experiences.

Unemployment, Masculinity, and the Crisis of Self

In modern India, unemployment has increasingly transformed identities, relationships, and self-perceptions, especially among male youth. Economic analyses frequently contextualize unemployment through growth rates, labour markets, and policy failures, yet these perspectives neglect its profound sociological ramifications. For young men, unemployment undermines culturally ingrained concepts of masculinity that are intricately linked to paid employment, economic support, and social dominance. In Indian society, where



masculinity has traditionally been defined by the role of the breadwinner, unemployment signifies not only a lack of income but also a symbolic failure to achieve socially recognized manhood. This essay contends that unemployment significantly influences masculine identity and self-perception among male youth by engendering feelings of inadequacy, emotional distress, and social marginalization, while simultaneously necessitating a reevaluation of masculine norms within a swiftly evolving socio-economic landscape.² Masculinity in India is not inherent or immutable; it is a socially constructed identity perpetuated by familial expectations, cultural narratives, and institutional practices. From a young age, men are taught that having a steady job is a sign of maturity, responsibility, and dignity. Work is not only a way to stay alive, but it is also a moral marker that sets apart the "successful man" from the "dependent" or "idle" one. This connection is strengthened through daily interactions, marriage negotiations, and family ties, where a man's value is determined by how much money he can make. So, unemployment puts at risk the very foundation of what makes a man a man. Young men who stay unemployed for longer than what is socially acceptable start to see themselves as incomplete or unsuccessful men, even when structural factors are out of their control.

This crisis has gotten worse because more people are going to college and there is a promise of merit-based mobility. For many years now, education has been pushed as the best way to get a job and move up in the world. Young men from different social backgrounds spend years getting degrees because they think that education will lead to steady jobs. When these expectations are not met, unemployment is not seen as a temporary situation but as a betrayal of hard work and hope. There is a lack of norms because young men are told to expect one thing but then see something else. This makes traditional paths to adulthood less believable. This situation has a big impact on how young people see themselves because they can't find work even though they have the right education.³

Unemployment also changes how young men see their role in the family. In a lot of Indian families, sons are expected to take on financial responsibilities, help with the family's income, and take care of their aging parents. Long-term dependence makes this change harder and changes the power dynamics in the home. Young men who are out of work often say they feel embarrassed and like they have lost their authority, especially when

they still depend on their parents or siblings for money. Everyday interactions, like asking for money or reminding someone to look for a job, can make people feel embarrassed. Over time, these kinds of experiences can make you feel less confident and more inadequate because they make you think of masculinity as being dependent on others instead of being independent.⁴ Social gaze is a large portion of the way males position themselves when they are unemployed. Neighbours, family members, friends normally criticize the state of an individual in terms of life performance without consulting him. The inquiries regarding the employment situation, the comparison with other employed people, and the slightest types of mockery are all the reasons why people become more conscious of how they are evaluated by others. To unemployed young men, the public places are in most cases a source of anxiety rather than home. The typical response is to avoid social gatherings, weddings, and community activities, which is an indication that they are trying to keep off being observed. However, it is this withdrawal that makes individuals feel even more alienated and confirms negative perceptions about themselves, and through the process that being unemployed draws social exclusion and internalized stigma.⁵

Dominant masculine ideals also influence the expression of feelings by the unemployed young men. Traditional expectations of emotional control do not allow men to express their vulnerability, fear, or distress openly. As a result, psychological pressure is often kept in and manifests itself in the form of irritability, anger or quietness. A large number of young men tend to view unemployment as their individual failure rather than being an outcome of structural issues. The significance of this internalization is that it shifts the blame of issues within the system such as jobless growth and saturated labor market to issues within the individual. That way, the systemic inequality can be transformed into the personal guilt of masculinity. At the same time, unemployment makes young men redefine their masculine identities in complex ways. It has been observed that some individuals stick to the traditional concept of breadwinner masculinity though some are beginning to question whether it is being relevant anymore. Other signs of masculinity gradually emerge in such a case, when it is impossible to secure stable employment. These may be moral self-control, school determination, has a business idea or is able to come back after emotional failure. Such renegotiations do not necessarily



liberate the people, they usually occur when the people are in pressure and they are not aware of the next course of action. However, they demonstrate that masculinity does not simply disappear when men are deprived of their jobs; it is adaptive to new circumstances.⁶

Peer networks play a useful as well as detrimental role in this process. On the one hand, experiencing the same thing as a person will make him or her feel less lonely and more involved. On the other hand, peer comparison may cause individuals to feel more insecure particularly when some in the group secure employment, and others fail to get employment. These dynamics are even more pronounced by means of digital spaces. The pictures of success, consumption, and upward mobility displayed in social media platforms are usually carefully selected by the unemployed youths who use these pictures as a reference point to evaluate themselves. Exposure to such types of images makes individuals feel more excluded and inadequate as masculinity is associated with observable achievement and material presentation.⁷ Socially acceptable changes such as marriage are also slower in coming about due to unemployment. Marriage in India still represents a major indicator of adulthood in men. People tend to give much emphasis on the job position and the stability of their income when negotiating marriage. This demonstrates the way work is associated with being a man. Unemployed young men are also not allowed to marry, or are advised to wait before they become financially stable. This stigma impacts more on the perceptions of people regarding themselves since marriage is associated with maturity, respectability, and social status. Lack of ability to fulfil this expectation places a person in a field of being left behind in time and space.

It is important to note that not all social groups have the same result of joblessness on masculinity. The experience and interpretation of unemployment are dependent on the class background, caste position, and regional context. Middle-class educated young people are often faced with high levels of identity dissonance due to high expectations and greater dedication to school. Conversely, youths of working-classes might perceive the jobless situation as a normalized threat, but it does not reduce its emotional intensity. Nonetheless, amidst these differences, there is still the association of masculinity and employment which ensures that unemployment is constantly lowering the self-worth of the male. Analytically, the

concept of unemployment as gendered phenomenon challenges policy discourses embracing jobless as an economic issue. When unemployment is merely discussed as numbers and growth indicators, its impact on identity, dignity, and mental health did not even appear. Such invisibility makes the silence in the vulnerability of men more powerful and sustains destructive ideas that associate being a man with being successful in business. A sociological approach suggests that unemployment is changing not only the economic situation but also the moral and emotional sphere of young men.⁸

Social and Familial Pressures on Unemployed Male Youth

Unemployment among male youth in contemporary India generates intense social and familial pressures that are deeply rooted in traditional gender roles. These pressures arise not only from material dependency but from the moral and symbolic expectations attached to masculinity. In Indian society, masculinity has long been organised around the ideals of economic provision, authority within the family, and public respectability. When young men are unable to secure employment, these ideals do not simply weaken; they turn into sources of judgement, anxiety, and emotional strain. This analysis argues that unemployment exposes male youth to layered social and familial pressures that reinforce traditional gender roles, producing a crisis of dignity and self-worth rather than sympathy or collective understanding. Within the family, employment functions as the primary marker of male adulthood. Sons are socialised from an early age to understand that their transition into manhood is incomplete without paid work. Employment symbolises responsibility, maturity, and readiness to assume future roles as husbands, fathers, and caregivers to ageing parents. Unemployment disrupts this expected life course, placing young men in a prolonged state of dependence that contradicts the masculine ideal of autonomy. Familial support, though essential for survival, often carries implicit expectations and moral scrutiny. Financial dependence on parents is rarely treated as a neutral condition; it is framed as a temporary failure that must be urgently corrected.⁹

The pressure of parents can be considered one of the strongest influences on the experience of unemployed male youth. Unemployment is often seen by the parents and especially the fathers as a sign of insufficient effort, inappropriate decisions or



even lack of discipline. This is informed by the differences between generations, in which the older generations tend to perceive employment success through hard work and not structural opportunity. Constant reminders of the need to work harder, take any job one can get, or even gauge oneself against other working neighbours make the home a place of endless judgment. In the long run, these interactions destroy trust and strengthen the feeling of incompetence, as manhood becomes equated with disillusionment instead of possibility.¹⁰ Mothers, in spite of being more emotionally supportive are also reproducers of gendered expectations in subtle forms. The fear of a son getting married and his social status, as well as his status in safeguarding the family, often convert to anxiety pressure. The emotional support, therefore, becomes mingled with fear on how to be seen by others, which drives the notion that a man without a job is placed in an incomplete social role. The family, rather than being a place of refuge in itself, is becoming a place where traditional gender norms are actively reproduced even in situations where structurally it is hard to do so.

It is further pressurized by the presence of extended family networks. Members of the family usually act as unofficial keepers of success where meetings and ceremony are chances to evaluate the level of employment. Inquiries concerning employment opportunities, unrequested recommendations, and comparisons of cousins or neighbours serve as social control mechanisms. These exchanges seldom recognize economic realities at large; unemployment is being treated as a personal failure and not a mass issue. Repeated exposure to such judgements among unemployed male youth develops a sense of failure, which leads them to withdraw when out in social places to avoid embarrassment.¹¹ In addition to the family, there are community expectations that support traditional gender roles in the day in day out social interaction. To a significant degree, respect and recognition are shown to men in youth in most of the local contexts in cases that are associated with visible economic activity. Employment defines who will be listened to in collective debates, who will be consulted when making decision affecting the family, and who will be obeyed amongst fellow workers. Unemployed youth are also likely to lose their visibility in society where their views are less heard and their presence is secondary. This loss of identity has a direct impact on self conception in that society has to recognize

masculinity through open recognition in the same way that masculinity is defined by the self identity.¹²

The pressure of marriage is one of the strongest points of intersection between unemployment and gender norms. Marriage in the Indian society is not a personal achievement, but a social qualification of adulthood and manliness. The fact that employment is considered a requirement to be married supports the assumption that a man has to be economically worthy before he can create a family. Unemployed male young people are often not part of the marriage negotiations, or advised to delay marriage forever. Such exclusion has a strong emotional weight because marriage is linked to respectability, sexual legitimacy and social belonging. The view of being socially incomplete is strengthened by being considered to be not ready to get married.¹³ These pressures in marriage are not abstract but are being expressed in the form of family discussions, communal gossiping, and rituals in the community. The constant delaying of marriage increases anxiety concerning tomorrow and strengthens dependency since young men are staying longer in their parents homes than what society expects them to stay. This long-lasting reliance goes against the prevailing masculine values of self-reliance and power, which forms frustrations and stalemates even more. Unemployment in such a way postpones not only living in economic mobility but also other significant social shifts that are characteristic of the adulthood of men.

Peer comparison is also a source of social pressure that is extremely strong when times of long unemployment occur. The male peer groups are commonly a place where masculinity is enacted and confirmed in the form of work, income and consumption conversations. The status of the person who has not yet got employment changes when the peers get jobs. The same discussions that used to strengthen unity start creating insecurity, as the success and failure are compared with each other. Leaving the peer networks is a usual action as a result of fear of being judged and losing face. This withdrawal also aims to alienate unemployed youths and limits the chance of emotional support.¹⁴ These pressures have an emotional aspect that the norms that do not encourage men to show their vulnerability further build up. Conventional masculinity glorifies emotional restraint, toughness and stoicism and allows minimal space to express distress. The unemployed young men tend to be forced to hide the feelings of anxiety, sadness, or fear, to keep the appearance of masculinity. This



silence changes the social and family pressure into internalised stress, which raises the possibility of emotional loss and psychological stress. The impossibility to talk about failure freely supports the idea that the masculinity must suffer without any complaints.

Notably, these forces are not imposed on an individual but internalised by socialisation. Most of the unemployed young men arrive to judge themselves through the same gendered norms that are their judges. They gauge their self-worth by productivity, income, and public recognition even when such is impossible. This internalisation means that even when the social and familial expectations are not being actively and directly criticised they still provide influence. Masculinity will turn into a perpetual location of self-policing where unemployment is perceived as the inadequacy of morality and not as one of structural marginalization.¹⁵ These pressures are determined by the location of the classes. Families of the middle classes, which have made significant investments in education, tend to feel threatened by unemployment as a status and respectability threat. There are increased expectations and low tolerance to delay. Families of working classes can be more tolerant of employment inability, but the need to have men earn a living is considered strong. In both the context of classes, the gendered relationship between work and masculinity continues to be the case where unemployment always brings down male dignity. Analytically, these patterns depict that unemployment is a social stressor which brings traditional gender roles to life and not to be weakened. Rather than encouraging the society to reconsider masculinity, unemployment tends to exacerbate the normative pressures, which puts more pressure on young men to be reintegrated into society. The economic environment makes fulfilment of their gender ideals a challenge, which families and communities react to by sticking to their known ideals of gender. This paradox is the core of unemployment crisis among male youths.¹⁶

Coping Strategies and Identity Negotiations

Long-term unemployment in modern India urges male youth to form elaborate coping mechanisms and carry out unceasing masculine identity arbitrage. Lacking the access to stable employment, young men have to face the discrepancies between the ideals of masculinity imposed by society and their real lives. The process is not associated with a consistent response, but it

leads to a set of adaptive, defensive, and transformative responses in the face of which unemployed male youth tries to save face, cope with stigma, and maintain a congruent sense of self. This discussion proceeds to suggest that coping with unemployment is based on psychological survival and social repositioning which demonstrates the flexibility and constraint of masculinity as a social construction. Certainly, it is one of the most popular coping mechanisms withdrawal of public and social areas. Having to be questioned and compared all the time, most unemployed young men tend to limit the amount of interaction in a family, peer interaction and community events. Withdrawal is a defensive process, which helps people to prevent humiliation and social condemnation. But this move tends to increase isolation and strengthen the invisibility. Although withdrawal can ease immediate emotional strain, it eliminates access to social support and joint coping, which makes unemployment an individual experience.¹⁷

The other important approach regards a redefinition of the concept of productivity and success. Some unemployed male youths also redefine work outside the formal employment in response to the erosion of the breadwinner masculinity. They can keep themselves useful and keep their self-respect by either taking temporary work, volunteering, developing skills, or unpaid work with families. Though hardly making the young men financially independent, these activities allow them to proclaim their moral value and avoid the label of inactivity. Such redefinition is an effort to decouple masculinity with income, even though it is limited by larger social norms.¹⁸ Perseverance and acquisition of skills is also an aspect of coping. Most of the unemployed young people spend more time in competitor tests, vocational training or higher education because the education would provide them with hope and justification. Further education serves to postpone the value of stigma that comes with unemployment because it makes the idea of unemployment a preparation instead of a failure. But it is an emotional risk, because repetitions of the preparation-fail-preparation cycle will only increase frustration and self-doubt. Education therefore plays a two sided coping role as it maintains hope but adds on to uncertainty.

Another type of identity negotiation is entrepreneurial aspirations. Other young men take up the discourse of independence and creativity and present entrepreneurship as a substitute masculine route. The discourse of entrepreneurship enables



unemployed young people to reassert control and lay off dependency even when they have not realised actual entrepreneurial venture. This plan is consistent with dominant discourses of individualism and resilience, yet it redistributes responsibility, on the side of structural constraints, to personal undertaking. Failure here can also become internalised, which builds up anxiety instead of resolving it. Strategies of coping in the form of a family are also important. A lot of the unemployed male youth find their way back into the home by renegotiating their place in the home by working through domestic labour, caring or doing house chores. Although these activities are likely to confuse the traditional gender division of labour, they are usually perceived as things momentary and not role alterations. These efforts are often minimized publicly by young men, as they represent the active devaluation of care work in the culture of masculinity. However, these things covertly widen the realms of masculinity by introducing the responsibility that is not tied to earnings.¹⁹

Peer solidarity is a valuable emotional tool to deal with a long period of unemployment. Social support systems among the unemployed young people offer an opportunity to exchange experiences, frustrations, and survival methods. The need to share humour, common accounts of injustice and mutual support contributes to normalization of unemployment and minimizes self blame. Simultaneously, some peer spaces might also replicate competitive pressures especially in case the employment results differ within the group. Identity negotiation in peer networks is as such the back and forth between solidarity and comparison.²⁰ Online communities have become the major coping and self-presentation venues. Social media enables jobless young people to create images of ambitious, competent, and future oriented people. Posting inspirational content, studying schedules, or business plans will be beneficial in combating the shame of unemployment. Nevertheless, the regular exposure to the stories of success and material demonstration may enhance the sensation of inadequacy. Digital coping is therefore a fine balancing process between aspiration and self protection.

The other important dimension of coping is emotional regulation. The conservative sets of male values do not encourage a direct demonstration of weakness, which is why many unemployed young men are encouraged to cope with distress either through silence or repressed emotions. Others divert

the frustration to physical exercise, religion or creative activity which is a temporary relief and a perceived control. These habits are useful to remain emotionally stable, yet these habits restrict the possibility of open conversations and collective awareness of a common sufferer.²¹ Notably, even long-term unemployment also creates the moments of critical thinking and opposition. There are young men who start doubting the validity of age-old gender roles which portray masculinity as a synonym of financial prosperity. By accepting unemployment as a structural problem and not an individual failure they redefine self-worth ethically, relationally or intellectually. This considerate bargaining is a possible movement into less exclusionary and rigid forms of masculinity, but the movements are still limited by the prevailing social conventions. The background of the classes forms the access and the efficiency of coping mechanisms. The middle-class youth tend to use educational and aspirational coping systems whereas the working-class youth might use informal work and family involvement. All these differences notwithstanding, the necessity to retain masculine honour in circumstances of unemployability is a common one. In different contexts, coping mechanisms are characterised by a conflict between adaptation and conformity, resistance and internalisation.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that unemployment among male youth in contemporary India is not only an economic condition but a deeply social and gendered experience. The inability to secure stable employment disrupts culturally embedded expectations of masculinity centred on provision, independence, and authority. As a result, unemployed young men experience diminished self-worth, emotional distress, and strained social relationships. The findings show that masculinity is actively negotiated under conditions of joblessness, rather than passively lost. Young men adopt varied coping strategies, ranging from redefining success and masculinity to internalising failure and social withdrawal. Family and community responses often intensify pressure, reinforcing traditional gender norms even when structural conditions make their fulfilment difficult. This tension contributes to anxiety and delayed social transitions such as marriage and economic independence. The study argues that youth unemployment must be examined through a sociological lens that recognises the role of gender norms in shaping lived experiences. Policy responses should therefore address not only



employment generation but also the social expectations attached to work, masculinity, and dignity in a changing Indian society.

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