

Rs 228,381 a job

RATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Sunil Jain, Business Standard, 27 February 2006

No, that's not the starting salary of a graduate these days, it's the cost of placement for a graduate—over the last five years, the Delhi government spent Rs 20.6 crore to get 902 people jobs out of a total of 539,734 registered at 20 employment exchanges across the capital, at Rs 228,381 apiece. Given that the everyday headhunters you and I deal with charge around a month's salary for an average placement, the Delhi government's expenditure is probably justified if those 902 people get a starting monthly salary of Rs 228,381—yet, it's hardly likely anyone getting a job through an employment exchange gets anything more than Rs 10,000 per month, tops. In other words, the cost of placement is higher than the salaries got!

And yet, no one in the capital's government is even thinking of shutting down employment exchanges—that would reduce employment by 260 people! In any case, closing departments is not that easy—the Evaluation Report of the Planning Department recommended the Delhi Energy Development Agency be closed down in 1997, but the agency's still in the process of being wound up.

This, among a host of others, is a finding from Parth J Shah's Centre for Civil Society's (CCS's) second Delhi Citizen Handbook, a primer on various departments in the capital's government, what they're supposed to deliver and what they actually do. The CCS, for those not familiar with it, is run on a shoestring budget out of a modest flat in Hauz Khas in south Delhi, and the studies are done by kids in, or just about out of, college—the team for the second handbook was primarily from the Rai Foundation's College of Media and Communications in New Delhi.

The first Delhi handbook revealed facts that few Delhi-ites were familiar with, and this one does the same. Did you know, for instance, that Delhi was the cleanest of all the metros—in the sense that it has double the number of sweepers that any metro has per 10,000 persons? Or that the drug control department has 29 drug inspectors for over 5,000 chemist shops, or that, since there are 28 inspectors to oversee 1.5 lakh registered food outlets in the capital, each outlet would get inspected once in 17 years if one outlet is inspected every day, and the only holidays were Sundays—this, by the way, has improved, the second handbook tells us, and there are now 34 inspectors, reducing the inspection period to a more respectable once in 14 years. The actual performance, by the way, is way below even this. In 2003, the number of food samples taken was a mere 2,080 (power of random sampling?); of this 169 were found to be adulterated and there were just 23 convictions. The picture for the next year was marginally better.

The first thing that strikes you about the second Delhi handbook (there was an equally striking one on Jharkhand last month, see "Jharkhand's record", Business Standard, January 30, 2006), even before you read the chilling facts, is that various departments have to be Finance Minister P Chidambaram's delight, in the sense they just don't spend any of the money allocated to them. The department of higher education used up just under 8 per cent of its allocation last year. It isn't the only one. The Delhi Fire Service, you'd think, would be exceeding its budget each year since Delhi's so poorly served in terms of fire stations and equipment. Guess again. In the Ninth Plan period, the Delhi Fire Service had an allocation of Rs 100 crore but spent just Rs 38 crore—perhaps why, the CCS volunteers tell us, you have a staff shortage of anywhere between 26 and 50 per cent in various departments.

You can multiply the examples any number of times, and I'm sure handbook number three on Delhi, number two on Jharkhand, or number one on a host of states will provide journalists such as myself excellent examples to cite while running down various governments. That, however, is not the purpose behind the work. The purpose of the handbooks, the way I see it, is to create a

model format for governments to report, suo motu, their performance on various parameters, much like the way in which Mr Chidambaram came up with the Outcomes Budget last year.

So, as a citizen, it's not important if, to use a random number, Rs 13,597 crore was spent by the government on education, but whether the cost per student was Rs 999 per month or whether it was Rs 2,008—if the cost is more than the Rs 999 that it costs to educate children in a private school (according to the first Delhi handbook, which also tells us it costs Rs 2,008 in government schools), then surely I have a right to demand government schools be shut down, especially since their results aren't better. I have a right, similarly, to demand that holiday homes for industrial workers (a scheme under the Delhi government that I'm sure no one's aware of) be shut down since just 124 workers used these facilities in 2004-05 (493 Delhi government employees too did!), on which Rs 29 lakh was spent—why not just give the workers Rs 23,387 each and wind up the department?

Here's to hoping Mr Chidambaram's budget tomorrow, and the next two after that start implementing in a big way what Parth Shah's begun in his own modest manner.