

REVIEW ARTICLE

Gig, Green, or Government Job? Gen Z's Career Preferences and India's Future Economic Policy

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Turangi S. Gig, Green, or Government Job? Gen Z's Career Preferences and India's Future Economic Policy. J Soc Welfare Manag. 2026; 18(2): 61-68.

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the emerging career aspirations of India's Generation Z (born ~1997-2012) through the lens of an "Aspirational Trilemma": the competing pulls of the Gig economy (autonomy and precariousness), the Green economy (purpose and sustainability), and the Government job (security and status). It argues that this generation's work preferences, shaped by digital nativity, climate urgency, and a re-evaluation of success, signal a profound shift in India's labour landscape, from a quest for singular employment to the navigation of multiple, often hybrid, work identities. However, current economic policy remains fragmented, treating these sectors in isolation rather than as interconnected elements of a hybrid workforce. Synthesising emerging survey data, qualitative insights, and a critical policy analysis, the article demonstrates a critical misalignment between Gen Z's contingent, values-driven aspirations and India's siloed, industrial-era labour and education frameworks. It reveals how the trilemma manifests differently across urban-rural, class, and gender lines, creating a complex mosaic of aspirations that defies one-size-fits-all solutions. The conclusion proposes an integrated policy agenda focused on creating portable social security ecosystems, launching a comprehensive national green skills mission, and fundamentally modernising the public service ethos and infrastructure. The ultimate aim is to provide a roadmap for transforming this generational trilemma from a policy challenge into a foundation for resilient, innovative, and inclusive economic growth.

KEYWORDS

- Generation Z • Gig Economy • Green Jobs • Labour Policy • Skills Development
- Social Security • Youth Aspirations • Future of Work • Hybrid Careers
- Economic Transition.

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➤ Received: 29-01-2026 ➤ Accepted: 28-02-2026



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INTRODUCTION

Navigating the Aspirational Trilemma of a Transformative Generation

India stands at a demographic and economic inflection point of historical significance. With over 375 million individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, Generation Z constitutes not only the largest youth cohort in the nation's history but also the first to come of age in a fully globalised, digitally mediated, and climatically precarious world (Gardiner et al., 2020). This generation is not merely a new demographic entering established systems; it is a transformative force, actively reshaping the very paradigms of work, success, and civic participation. Their career preferences, therefore, transcend individual choice to become powerful sociological signals and a critical litmus test for the adaptability of India's economic and policy architecture.

This article posits that Indian Gen Z's professional aspirations are crystallising around a distinct and compelling "Aspirational Trilemma," a framework capturing the three dominant, often competing, gravitational pulls in their occupational universe: the Gig economy (representing digital fluency, autonomy, and entrepreneurial risk), the Green economy (embodying environmental purpose, sustainability, and emerging market opportunities), and the Government job (signifying institutional security, social prestige, and traditional pathways to impact). This trilemma is more than a taxonomy of job sectors; it represents three competing visions for India's future: a digitally driven, entrepreneurial nation-state; a sustainable, climate-resilient developmental state; and a resilient society anchored by a capable, trusted public sector.

The central contention of this analysis is that India's existing economic and labour policy ecosystem, largely designed for a pre-digital, formal-sector-focused, and environmentally peripheral economy, is fundamentally misaligned with the hybrid, contingent, and values-driven nature of this trilemma. Policies such as the Social Security Code (2020) for gig workers, Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes for green tech manufacturing, and Mission Karmayogi for civil service reform are progressive steps, but they operate in distinct silos, addressing symptoms in isolation rather

than the interconnected reality of a generation that may cycle through all three sectors in a single career lifespan. This siloed approach fails to recognise the interdependencies and tensions within the trilemma—for instance, how a lack of green skills training affects both public sector projects and private gig opportunities in sustainability consulting, or how the allure of government job security is partly a reflexive response to the precarity of platform work.

Conceptually, this analysis is situated at the intersection of generational sociology, labour economics, and public policy. It employs Amartya Sen's capability approach as a guiding lens, shifting the policy question from mere job creation to enhancing the substantive freedoms and genuine opportunities available to Gen Z to pursue work they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). Mehrotra (2018) have underscored the structural challenges facing India's labour market in this context, highlighting the growing mismatch between existing institutional frameworks and the aspirations of the country's young workforce. Simultaneously, it engages with the political economy of employment in a large, heterogeneous democracy undergoing rapid digital and green transitions. The article addresses critical research gaps by providing an integrated analysis of these three aspiration poles, moving beyond sector-specific studies to explore their intersections. It also foregrounds the voices and rationales of Gen Z itself, using their articulated preferences to build a prospective rather than reactive policy framework. Through a synthesis of available quantitative data, qualitative narratives from diverse socio-economic contexts, and a critical review of current and proposed policies, this paper charts the contours of this generational shift and its profound implications for India's economic future.

2. The Allure and Anxiety of the Gig Economy: Autonomy in the Shadow of the Algorithm

For India's Gen Z, the gig economy is not an abstract economic concept but a lived, intuitive reality embedded in the very fabric of their digital existence. As true digital natives, their adolescence coincided with the proliferation of smartphones and the rise of platform capitalism, making apps like Swiggy, Uber, Instagram, and Upwork fundamental to their understanding of commerce, community, and labour. The rapid expansion of platform-based work in

India is well-documented, with NITI Aayog (2022) providing a comprehensive overview of the sector's growth and its implications for employment policy. The gig model represents a primary, not alternative, career imagination. Its core appeal is a powerful ethos of autonomy and agency. This generation displays a marked scepticism towards the rigid, hierarchical, and time-bound structures of traditional corporate India, often viewing the 9-to-5 office model as an archaic constraint on creativity and personal freedom (Tewari, 2025). This shift is reflected in broader generational trends, with Jain and Trivedi (2024) documenting how India's 377 million Gen Zers are reshaping economic and social norms, driven by values that prioritise flexibility, authenticity, and purpose over traditional markers of success. Recent surveys indicate that only 16% of Gen Z in India want a traditional full-time job, while 43% prefer a full-time job combined with a side hustle, reflecting a fundamental shift in work preferences (Tewari, 2025). Gig work, whether in low-skilled delivery services or high-skilled freelance software development, promises control—over one's time, workload, client choice, and often the creative or logistical process itself. This aligns with a broader global Gen Z value system that prioritises work-life integration over a strict balance, seeking to blend professional activity seamlessly with personal interests and rhythms.

This desire for autonomy is supercharged by digital fluency and the creator economy. Gen Z intuitively understands the mechanics of algorithmic visibility, personal branding, and digital networking. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Twitch have democratised entrepreneurship, enabling individuals to monetise passions—from gaming and beauty to education and activism—by building direct audiences. This has fundamentally redefined prestige and success. Becoming a successful “creator” or influencer is a validated and aspirational career path, fostering a shift from organisational loyalty to personal brand loyalty. The barrier to entry is perceived as low: a smartphone, a skill, and creativity can launch a micro-enterprise, particularly appealing to youth in tier-2 and tier-3 cities who may lack access to traditional corporate recruitment networks.

However, this glittering narrative of autonomy exists within a stark landscape of

precarity and algorithmic control. The deliberate absence of traditional employment safeguards often underwrites the flexibility celebrated by platforms. Most gig workers are classified as “independent contractors” or “partners,” a legal framing that typically excludes them from the protections of the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF), Employees' State Insurance (ESI), paid sick leave, or maternity benefits (Mollan, 2023). Income is inherently volatile, subject to fluctuating platform commission rates, opaque algorithmic distribution of work, and intense market saturation. The “freedom” to choose when to work can quickly morph into financial pressure to work unsocial hours to chase dynamic incentives or surge pricing. This creates what scholars term the “autonomy-precarity paradox,” where the very feature that attracts workers also facilitates their exploitation.

Furthermore, the workplace has been reconstituted through algorithmic management. While there may be no human supervisor, workers are governed by opaque software systems that dictate pay, continuously monitor performance through metrics like delivery time or customer ratings, and can deactivate access with little transparency or recourse (Kellogg et al., 2020; Kadolkar et al., 2025). This data-driven control can be more pervasive and unforgiving than human management, leading to significant stress and a loss of agency. The mental health toll of the constant “hustle,” the need for perpetual self-marketing, and the anxiety of income instability is a growing concern, highlighting a stark contradiction between the promised freedom and the experienced reality.

Policy responses have been slow and fragmented. The landmark Code on Social Security, 2020, is a conceptual breakthrough, recognising platform and gig workers as a new occupational category and mandating the creation of social security funds by both central and state governments. The Press Information Bureau (2025) confirms that “for the first time in the country, social security benefits have been extended to unorganised, gig and platform workers under Sections 113 & 114 of the Code on Social Security, 2020.” However, its implementation remains patchy, financing mechanisms are unclear, and crucially, it does not grant gig workers the collective bargaining rights or employment status of traditional

workers (ILO, 2023). State-level experiments, like Rajasthan's Platform-Based Gig Workers Welfare and Social Security Board, are pioneering but isolated. The critical policy gap is the lack of a cohesive, 21st-century framework. India needs a "Gig Worker Charter of Rights" that moves beyond retrofitting industrial laws. This charter should mandate: portable benefits (health, accident, and pension contributions tied to the individual, not the platform, accessible via a digital locker); algorithmic transparency (right to explanation for pay, penalties, and deactivation); and fair income standards (minimum earnings per active hour or task). For Gen Z to view the gig economy as a sustainable, long-term career avenue rather than a precarious stopgap or side-hustle, the state must architect a new social contract that bridges the chasm between informal work modalities and formal economic security.

3. The Green Imperative: Weaving Purpose into the Fabric of Careers

A defining, and perhaps existential, characteristic of India's Gen Z is its profound and widespread ecological consciousness. This is the first generation to have lived its entire life under the unambiguous shadow of anthropogenic climate change, witnessing intensifying monsoon variability, deadly heatwaves, and water crises as regular news. Their awareness is amplified by constant access to global scientific discourse and activist movements on social media. For a significant and growing segment, this environmental concern is maturing from protest and personal habit—such as refusing single-use plastics or embracing veganism—into a core vocational and values-driven choice. Careers in renewable energy (solar, wind, green hydrogen), circular economy and waste management, sustainable agriculture, green finance, ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) consulting, and climate tech are increasingly seen not as niche or altruistic pursuits, but as the defining growth industries of their professional lifetimes. This represents a powerful synthesis of purpose and prospect: a way to align personal ambition with planetary stewardship, offering what sociologists call "moral meaningfulness" alongside economic opportunity.

This perspective is not merely idealistic; it is economically astute. India's ambitious commitments under the Paris Agreement and

its domestic "Panchamrit" goals, including reaching net-zero emissions by 2070 and installing 500 GW of non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030, are catalysing unprecedented public and private investment. According to official sources, the renewable energy sector alone is projected to create about 28 lakh (2.8 million) jobs between August 2024 and March 2030, including 18 lakh (1.8 million) jobs in the next three years (Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2025). The International Renewable Energy Agency and International Labour Organization (2024) note that more than a million Indians are already engaged in varied roles across the green industry. Gen Z is positioning itself to be the engineers, project managers, policy analysts, and entrepreneurs who will build this new economy. The green job, therefore, represents a powerful convergence of ethical imperative and market signal.

However, a yawning green skills chasm threatens to derail this aspiration for many. The primary obstacle is a severe structural mismatch between the emerging demand for green skills and the supply from India's traditional educational and training systems. Curricula in core disciplines like engineering, management, agriculture, and finance often remain entrenched in 20th-century paradigms, with sustainability treated as an optional elective rather than an integrated foundational principle (Patra, 2024). A mechanical engineer passionate about wind turbine design, or a commerce graduate seeking a career in carbon credit trading, may find their formal education provides minimal relevant grounding. LinkedIn's Global Climate Talent Stocktake 2024, cited by Patra (2024), reveals that while demand for green talent in India increased by 11.6% from 2023 to 2024, supply grew by only 5.6%, highlighting a significant and growing talent gap. This has led to a confusing, unregulated, and often expensive marketplace of private certifications in ESG, sustainability reporting, or renewable energy management, with no standardised quality assurance or recognition framework.

This skills gap exacerbates an access and awareness divide. The pathways into green careers are clearest for elite, urban, English-speaking youth connected to global networks and premium institutions. For the vast majority in tier-2, tier-3 cities, and rural areas—where the impacts of climate change

are often most acute—the “how” of entering this sector remains opaque and intimidating. Career counselling cells in most colleges and universities lack the expertise or corporate connections to guide students towards green opportunities, perpetuating the perception that these are exclusive domains (Rukhaiyar, 2023).

While the government has launched commendable macro-level initiatives like the National Green Hydrogen Mission and PLI schemes for advanced chemistry cell (ACC) battery storage and solar PV modules, these are predominantly supply-side, capital-focused industrial policies. The corresponding demand-side human capital development ecosystem is underdeveloped. Bridging this gap requires a strategic, mission-mode intervention. First, the National Education Policy 2020 must be aggressively leveraged to mainstream sustainability and climate literacy as cross-cutting themes across all higher education streams, from law and design to economics and journalism. Second, a dedicated National Green Skills Mission (NGSM) should be launched under the Skill India umbrella, tasked with developing National Occupational Standards (NOS) for 100 priority green job roles, fostering industry-academia partnerships for curriculum design, and funding large-scale apprenticeship programmes within green industries. Third, proactive career communication and role modelling are essential. Public campaigns should move beyond abstract talk of “green jobs” to showcase tangible, relatable career journeys—the day in the life of a solar technician, a water resource manager, or a sustainability compliance officer. For Gen Z's environmental purpose to be fully realised as dignified employment, policy must construct a robust, accessible, and demystified ladder connecting climate consciousness to a formal career pathway.

4. The Unshakeable Pillar: Security, Status, and the Struggle to Modernise the Sarkari Naukri

In a fascinating counterpoint to the narratives of digital disruption and green transformation, the sarkari naukri (government job) remains a towering, resilient pillar of aspiration for millions of young Indians. Its enduring appeal, far from being a generational anachronism, is rooted in a rational, deeply symbolic, and

socio-economically potent calculus. The foremost attraction is ironclad socio-economic security. In a global and domestic economy characterised by volatility, the government job represents a near-unique promise: lifetime employment, a predictable and transparent career ladder, a guaranteed pension (under the National Pension System), and comprehensive health benefits. For first-generation graduates and families from lower-middle-class or rural backgrounds, it is perceived as the ultimate vehicle for transformative socio-economic mobility—a single appointment that can permanently lift an entire household out of precariousness and into the relative comfort of the organised sector. Majumdar (2023) notes that “for decades, government jobs have been acknowledged as the most comfortable and secure jobs,” which explains why Indian youth remain deeply drawn to sarkari naukri. The staggering statistics—over 1 million applicants annually for the UPSC civil services exam and a multi-billion-rupee coaching industry in cities like Kota, Delhi, and Prayagraj—are testament to the power of this security calculus.

Beyond material security lies immense social status and institutional authority. In a society where the state has historically been a central arbiter of opportunity and respect, a position in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Police Service (IPS), or even a state-level officers' cadre confers exceptional social capital. It is a publicly recognised marker of intellectual merit, perseverance, and success in the nation's most notoriously competitive arena. This status fulfils not only individual ambition but also deep familial and community expectations. Furthermore, for a principled and idealistic segment of Gen Z, government service offers an unparalleled avenue for tangible, large-scale impact. The prospect of shaping district-level development, influencing national policy, or representing the country internationally provides a profound sense of purpose and direct service to the nation—a “nation-building” ethos that resonates strongly with patriotic sentiment.

Yet, Gen Z's relationship with government jobs is characterised by profound ambivalence. They are its most dedicated aspirants and simultaneously its most perceptive critics. Their identities as digital natives create specific expectations that clash with the on-ground realities of much of government functioning.

They frequently perceive public bureaucracies as slow, riddled with red tape, resistant to technological innovation, and mired in hierarchical cultures that stifle initiative and merit-based recognition (Paradeshi, 2022). These perceptions are consistent with longstanding scholarly critiques of Indian state capacity and bureaucratic dysfunction (Kapur, 2020). The user experience of many citizen-facing services—often cumbersome and paper-intensive—stands in stark contrast to the seamless, app-based interfaces of private sector platforms they use daily. This generation does not aspire to the government job of their parents' era; they envision a modernised, tech-empowered, and performance-oriented public service. They are drawn to new-age, technocratic entry points, such as various Chief Minister's Fellowships or roles in think tanks like NITI Aayog, which promise a blend of public purpose and contemporary analytical methods.

Recognising this need for change, the government has initiated reforms. Mission Karmayogi—the National Programme for Civil Services Capacity Building (NPCSCB)—is a potentially transformative framework aimed at shifting the bureaucracy from a “rules-based” to a “roles-based” orientation, emphasising competencies in technology, empathy, design thinking, and public policy (Paradeshi, 2022). The World Bank (2022) has supported this initiative with a \$47 million project to strengthen India's public sector capabilities, targeting 20 million civil servants at the Centre and state levels. However, reforming a colossal administrative machinery is a generational project, and the pace of cultural change is often glacial. To actively attract and retain the best of Gen Z, reforms must be deepened and accelerated. Lateral entry at mid-to-senior levels must be expanded significantly and normalised as a core recruitment pathway, not an occasional experiment, to infuse fresh expertise and challenge institutional insularity. Digital transformation must be a non-negotiable key performance indicator for departments, with a focus on improving both the citizen experience and employee internal workflow efficiency. Most critically, the workplace culture and human resource management practices within government need deliberate modernisation. This includes promoting greater flexibility where operationally feasible, creating systems

to recognise and reward innovation, and fostering more collaborative, less hierarchical communication patterns. The state must strive to make a public service career competitively attractive not solely on the promise of lifelong security, but equally on the quality of the professional experience, the availability of cutting-edge tools, and the tangible capacity to drive measurable, positive change.

CONCLUSION

Synthesising the Trilemma—Towards an Integrated Policy Framework for a Hybrid Workforce

The career preferences of India's Gen Z present policymakers not with a simple menu of choices, but with a complex, dynamic, and internally contradictory trilemma. This reflects a generation that, out of necessity and design, is preparing for a working life of plurality—where an individual may pursue a government job for security while running a green-themed side gig, or work as a freelance tech consultant before transitioning into public policy for climate action. The central policy imperative, therefore, is not to manage three separate labour silos but to synthesise and build connective tissue between these pillars, creating a supportive, flexible ecosystem for hybrid and portfolio careers. This requires moving beyond sector-specific interventions to an integrated, cross-cutting framework.

The following recommendations outline the contours of such a framework:

1. **Architect a Universal Social Security Ecosystem (Formalising the Informal):** The state must lead in building a new social contract for non-standard work. This requires fully operationalising and adequately funding the Social Security Code through a Central Gig and Platform Workers Welfare Board. The cornerstone innovation should be a digital, portable, and individual-centric social security account (e.g., linked to Aadhaar or the National Career Service profile). Contributions from multiple platforms, voluntary contributions from the worker, and matched contributions from the state (on a sliding scale based on income) would accumulate to provide pension, health insurance, and paid leave coverage. This model decouples security from a single employer, making it portable across gig,

green, and formal contract roles, thereby reducing the risk of transitions and providing a foundational safety net.

2. **Launch a Comprehensive National Green Talent Mission (Catalysing the Green Transition):** Green ambition must be matched with green capability. A National Green Talent Mission (NGTM) should be established as an urgent priority, co-led by the Ministries of Skill Development and Environment, and industry bodies. Its mandate must be to: a) Develop and constantly update Standardised National Green Skill Frameworks for priority jobs; b) Fund and incentivise Green Apprenticeships and Fellowship Programs, making them a mandatory component in all large public and publicly-funded private green infrastructure projects; c) Create a National Green Talent Portal that maps skills, courses, internships, and job opportunities, demystifying the sector for aspirants across the country. This mission should explicitly target inclusion, ensuring women and youth from climate-vulnerable regions have preferential access to these skilling programs.
3. **Accelerate the Modernisation of Public Service (Reinventing the Government Pillar):** To remain competitive for talent, government must undergo an internal renaissance. Mission Karmayogi must be empowered with greater resources and measurable outcomes. Specifically, a mandatory “Digital First and Design Thinking” module should be incorporated for all incoming civil servants. Lateral entry should be scaled up to at least 10-15% of mid- to senior-level positions across all ministries within five years, institutionalising external expertise. Furthermore, the creation of a fixed-term, “Public Service Tech & Innovation Corps” — a prestigious fellowship for top engineering, design, and management graduates to solve specific digital governance challenges—could create a direct pipeline of tech-savvy talent into the state and improve its problem-solving capacity.
4. **Foster “Transition Pathways” and Hybrid Career Literacy:** Education and counselling systems must evolve to reflect

the new reality. The University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) should guide institutions to restructure their Career Support Cells into “Future of Work Centres.” These centres would provide counselling not just on placements, but on navigating the gig economy, identifying green upskilling courses, and preparing for public service exams, acknowledging all as valid career paths. Public narratives, through media and successful role models, should celebrate serial and portfolio careers, reducing the stigma of job transitions and showcasing individuals who have successfully navigated across the trilemma.

In conclusion, India's much-discussed demographic dividend will not be automatically realised by attempting to funnel its largest-ever youth cohort into 20th-century employment models. The energy and challenge of Generation Z lie precisely in their ability to hold multiple, seemingly contradictory possibilities in creative tension: valuing both autonomy and security, purpose and prestige, innovation and stability. The task for India's economic policy is to transcend the trilemma by designing systems where these aspirations are no longer mutually exclusive but can be synergistically combined. By formalising the gig economy with smart security, catalysing the green economy through targeted skilling, and modernising the government into a dynamic employer, India can craft a forward-looking social contract. This contract would empower its youth to build portfolio careers that are not only economically viable but also personally fulfilling and nationally consequential, turning the aspirational trilemma into a powerful trifecta that drives resilient, innovative, and inclusive growth in the 21st century.

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