



INDIA'S INTERNSHIP ECONOMY: WHERE WORK BEGINS WITHOUT WAGES

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ABSTRACT

In today's competitive world, internships are sold as stepping stones—but in India, for many, they feel more like stumbling blocks. Every year, thousands of young students take up unpaid internships across law firms, start-ups, design houses, media companies, and research centres—quietly doing real work for no real pay. This journal digs into the silent crisis that's been ignored for too long: the unpaid intern economy. It explores how “exposure” is used as an excuse to demand free labour, how legal protections simply don't exist, and how emotional, mental, and financial exhaustion is treated as a part of the learning curve. This paper will bring out what brochures and LinkedIn never show: interns who are overworked, under-recognized, and often left with nothing but a line on their resume, by real-world examples and raw observations. This piece is not only an academic look at our broken system but also the voice of every young person who is being gaslighted into believing that struggling in silence is a rite of passage and growth for their career.

INTRODUCTION

In today's era, internships are seen as the golden tickets to jobs, but the reality is that most of them are just unpaid labour. Internships were meant to help students learn before going for a big job, but now they are becoming free labour for the fancy names. The modern interns are often led to believe that unpaid internships are crucial for their careers and have to make a necessary sacrifice. Internships, for this generation, seem like a means to build their CVs and deprive them of the real meaning of gaining real-world exposure. Even competition had reached a peak among peer-pressured students, who tried to get any form of opportunity-based internships, whether paid or unpaid. Everyone is chasing experience regardless of whether they are learning something from it. Employers, especially in the legal field, media,

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and policy sectors, exploit this demand under the banner of “exposure.”¹ This whole generation is stuck in the “experience trap,” and the most ironic part is that an individual needs past work experience to get a job, but at the same time, they need a job to get work experience. Some students end up juggling two unpaid remote internships at once, and the reason behind this is just to show “range” on their CV. For every intern who lands a pre-placement offer, there are dozens of individuals who get ghosted after 3 months of free labour work.² The glamorised LinkedIn often hides a grim reality: interns had to work long hours, with no stipend and often no certificate. Each day, across India, there is a number of interns who walk into offices, cafes, and courtrooms with the purpose of not earning but just proving that they are hardworking and belong to the firm. Their main task commences with sending emails, for which they will never receive credit; preparing documents that they do not sign; and ending the day in Zoom calls without stipends. The interns design marketing decks, research legal cases, edit podcast episodes, and build software patches, all of this without any payment. They handle real-world software, deadlines, clients, and edits, and yet, despite all this, still get introduced as “just an intern.” In the journalism field, the interns are told to write headlines that go viral. In the tech field, they write codes that survive testing. But the brutal reality is that their name vanishes and never appears. Interns watch their friends and peers getting paid jobs while they are writing one more “follow-up email” after being ghosted. They are stuck in a loop of internship after internship, and the reason behind it is not that they are not capable, but because the ladder has no first rung. The same intern had to apply even for unpaid ones to stay competitive in the global race of this era.

A LEGAL VACUUM: DO UNPAID INTERNS HAVE RIGHTS IN INDIA?

Unpaid interns work across industries and firms—from newsrooms to coding labs—but in the eyes of our law, they barely exist. Even our Indian law does not contain any provision that protects the “intern.”³ Minimum Wages Act, Factories Act, and Shops and Establishment Acts—these acts all mention employees and their basic rights, but not interns. Most unpaid interns do not receive any offer letters, contracts, or written terms, thus making no space for any form of accountability. In the engineering fields, interns operate machinery without insurance. As in the case of journalism, interns chase stories with no press ID or safety nets for them. In the media field, they face mental health breakdowns, especially under toxic

¹ Nandita Iyer, ‘The Hidden Cost of Exposure: Why India’s Interns Deserve More than Experience’ The Hindu (New Delhi, 4 March 2022)

² Shreya Sinha, ‘Ghosted After Free Labour: Interns Speak Up’ The Quint (New Delhi, 17 May 2021)

³ Sanchita Das, ‘Do Interns Have Rights in India?’ Live Law (New Delhi, 12 July 2020)

bosses, but there is no such policy that exists to protect them. Colleges push the students for internships to get exposure and experience, but never ask the interns if that experience includes learning, safety, and dignity for them. In courtrooms, firms, and committees, unpaid interns are invisible; their exploitation is normalized now, and their absence is never noticed. In tech firms, interns push the live code. In PR agencies, they manage client decks, but they are still disqualified from receiving minimum wage. Even when interns work full-time, employers simply deny their benefits by stating that they are not on payroll. Despite millions of interns working in all states across India every year, there is no such policy discussed regarding their rights. Our honourable courts have addressed labour, minimum wages, and even gig workers, but never unpaid interns. There is no government database tracking the statistics of interns working as unpaid, under what conditions, and the outcome. Academic institutions demand internship completion for each year, but never check the internship environment. The National Education Policy of India mentions internships, but as exposure and not about the labour work they are going through⁴. India overall lacks an Internship Rights Code policy or any welfare schemes for these young professionals. Courts never treat unpaid internships as an issue of labour dignity, perhaps because interns never look poor. Until and unless there is legal recognition of this labour work, unpaid interns will continue to fall, and they will be stuck in “seen everywhere, protected nowhere.

THE REAL-WORLD COST OF BEING FREE LABOUR

Unpaid internships are often disguised and presented as a “learning phase,” but the reality is harsher. Interns’ shoulders suffer from emotional, financial, and physical burdens that rarely get acknowledged. Interning, especially in Delhi, Mumbai, or Bangalore, means spending their own money on rent, the metro, and meals without any aid. Many interns spend more on travel, food, and formal clothes that they can hardly afford, just to be visible and in the spotlight. Some take loans from parents or friends to survive the internship period, and they believe this will benefit them in the future. Interns often invest in software, apps, and courses to meet the job’s requirements without having hope of any reimbursement, and so they even skip lunch or any eatables to maintain their expenses. In creative fields, including design or video editing, interns use their tools, laptops, and subscriptions to deliver client work⁵. Many interns were seen withdrawing from internships midway just because of financial exhaustion. Rural areas and Tier-2 students suffer the most; they neither can afford to intern because of

⁴ Ministry of Education, National Education Policy 2020 (Government of India 2020) Para 4.6

⁵ Rhea Gupta, Internships or Exploitation? A Design Student’s Take’ Scroll.in (Mumbai, 8 December 2021)

the financial crisis⁶ nor can they work under extremely strained conditions. The interns who do multiple unpaid internships in metropolitan cities often spend over Rs 20000-40000 cumulatively, with little to none in return. The unpaid intern may look good in formal shirts and laptops, but often they hide a constant financial struggle underneath. Many interns take on 2-3 internships at once just to feel 'productive' and compete with the other peers, which leads to breakdowns, missed deadlines, and fatigue. They smile in LinkedIn posts, but often they are insecure, under-confident, and exhausted. These interns cry in silence after work, and the reason behind this is often that they feel unvalued, ignored, and invisible. Long working hours in the firm with no appreciation slowly lower the motivation and courage. The fear of being "left behind" often scares them and makes them overcompensate, which results in the cost of sleep, family time, and even health. Interns spend months and years working unpaid, which results in the cost of delaying actual entry into paid employment. Many of them complete 3-4 internships and yet struggle to secure even a Rs. 20000 job. Not only this, but many of them are being told that they lack experience, despite working unpaid on real-time projects. Interns graduate with a good, full resume but with an empty bank account and low confidence. Even when finally hired, they are often offered low-paying jobs because they are seen as "intern material" in the firm. In creative industries, employers ask for portfolios from employees, but they ignore the content that was created by interns for free. After graduation, a few interns are told to start again as unpaid, just for a few months, to prove their worth. Some intern loses years waiting for their big break, only to realize again that they are being used and discarded. The cost of unpaid work is not just about money; it is time, momentum, and self-worth that are lost along the way.

THE ILLUSION OF OPPORTUNITY: HOW THE SYSTEM IS DESIGNED TO KEEP INTERNS DESPERATE

Mostly, interns are told, "Work hard, and we might hire you," but the harsh reality is that this "might" often means "never." Interns spend months trying to prove to themselves that they are committed to the firm, but they are replaced by the next batch of unpaid hopefuls. Companies always want ready-made employees, but want interns to stay learners. Many interns are afraid of asking about their stipend because it may ruin their chances for future hiring. Colleges proudly post photos of intern students working with big companies, and questions about the internship environment are absent. Placement platforms such as

⁶ Devika Sharma, 'Tier-2 Dreams, Metro Costs: Why Rural Interns Struggle in Cities' Youth Ki Awaaz (New Delhi, 15 June 2022)

Internshala, LinkedIn, and even Telegram groups are filled with unpaid “opportunities”⁷ that are disguised as jobs. There are numerous kinds of real-world examples, regardless of any field, regarding the labour-intensive unpaid internships across the nation. A student from a law background interned with a top-tier litigation firm in Delhi⁸ for 4 weeks for case drafting, attending court hearings, and writing client summaries. This whole period, no stipend was being provided, and the intern was ghosted without even giving a recommendation letter. A fashion intern in Mumbai revealed on Instagram that she worked 12 hours daily at a major brand showroom, steaming garments and managing models in 2002, and when her intern period was over, she received a gift as a note of “thank-you.” An individual intern at a well-known Hindi news channel worked 6 days a week and was handling vox pops, editing sound bites, and writing subtitles. After the period was over, when she asked for a stipend, the producer of the channel stated that if she were good, she would be hired, and the worst part was that she was not hired.

A journalism student shared her internship period in a Quora thread⁹ about during the internship; she wrote 10 news articles daily for a digital media firm. Later, she noticed her byline was removed and the articles were posted under the editor’s name. In one notable case of a Delhi NGO, the firm asked three interns to conduct a ground-level survey for a month. For one month, the interns travelled in peak heat, gathered rural data, and submitted a detailed report of the month. The NGO posted the work on LinkedIn, thanking the founder and not even thanking the intern or providing any stipend for the task. An engineering student interned at a startup in Bangalore, and despite the fact that he completed a major backend module, he was asked to stay on for a second month without pay, and the excuse was that it was to prove his seriousness towards the startup. These are just one of the many stories across Reddit, Quora, and other online sites where hundreds of interns in India have echoed one sentiment: that they gave their energy and skills to prove their presence and that they matter, but the system is designed to take others' work and provide labour-intensive, unpaid work to the interns. Interns are gaslighted into believing that they are the problem in a company or firm if they ask for a stipend or their dignity.

⁷ Vidit Jain, ‘Internships or Free Labour’ India’s Online Internship Market Unveiled’ Economic Times (Mumbai, 22 February 2023)

⁸ India Blog (2023) <www.intern-experience.in/law-delhi-topfirm>

⁹ <www.quora.com/unpaid-journalism>

EXPOSURE WON'T PAY RENT: THE GREAT STIPEND LIE

Interns are told from the very beginning to treat exposure like currency and as if it's a salary, but exposure does not feed stomachs, recharge phone bills, or pay rent and transportation costs. Most of these are not even introduced to clients or given credit for work. In start-ups, employers often say that they cannot afford stipends but ironically host launch parties¹⁰ and post Diwali bonuses for staff people. In NGOs, interns do all the real work, from preparing real reports to doing all the fieldwork¹¹, and then, at last, are left out when the work is showcased in a public forum. Companies use interns' ideas in campaigns, win clients, and then all forget who made the draft in the first place. Some interns accept unpaid roles just for the "brand" on their CV, and they themselves know this would not change their bank balance. Interns are often told that they will be "given a chance" to prove themselves, but are not even provided a single penny for the work they have already done for the firm. For lower-income interns, unpaid internships are a quiet personal crisis for them.¹²

As the family expectations pile up, interns start lying at home and start pretending that they are doing well while surviving on borrowed money. In creative fields, interns pay for premium editing software just to meet client standards for unpaid labour. During this period, the emotional guilt of asking for more money from the family¹³ often makes them feel guilty for the work, and they criticize themselves for not being good enough for the family. In recent times, unpaid internships have become so common that students feel lucky just to be selected, even if they have to suffer mental and physical health for this work. When an intern asks for a stipend, it is often viewed as arrogance, and they are told that exposure means everything. There is no accountability; if an intern disappears or leaves midway due to burnout, the company or system will fill the seat again. In job interviews, unpaid internships are rarely valued, and this is not counted as real experience. The cycle repeats again and again. An intern hustles and works harder, accepts no stipend, and hopes for more, while the system has already given them enough praise and notes of thank-you to keep going. Yet, every year, thousands more sign up for unpaid internships because it feels better than doing nothing to compete in this global work race.

¹⁰ Ayesha B, 'The Irony of Startups: Free Labour, Lavish Launches' Business Standard (Bangalore, 11 October 2021)

¹¹ Rekha Menon, 'NGOs and the Invisible Workforce' India Development Review (Mumbai, 29 September 2022)

¹² Tanvi Deshpande, 'the Economic Injustice of Unpaid Internships' The Wire (New Delhi, 13 August 2020)

¹³ Priya Malik, 'The Mental Cost of Working for Free' the Swaddle (Mumbai, 18 November 2022)

CONCLUSION

Interns in India should not be viewed as students anymore; they are silent workers, unpaid contributors, and the invisible pillars behind thousands of companies. They work like professionals in writing, designing, and research and deliver the work given by the company, yet these interns walk away with just a folder full of unpaid certificates and a tired body that is running out of patience. These interns were viewed as learners, but they want to work with respect and dignity. Asking about a stipend is not an offense; it is the little payment that they deserve while doing the company's work so that they can afford a sandwich after their shift and can go back with a vehicle. They wanted to feel that their skills, energy, and time meant something for the firm other than their CV and resume. This journal was not just about law or labour policies. It was about dignity, about the emotional and financial battles that go unnoticed behind a smiling post on LinkedIn. If our nation wants to sharpen future professionals, then our system has to stop treating them like free labour. The stipend should not be too high; it just needs to exist¹⁴. Because calling it 'exposure' does not make it any less of exploitation.

¹⁴ Editorial, 'the Minimum Wage for Interns: Is It Time India Listens?' Times of India (New Delhi, 23 January 2024)