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To cite this article: Carol Upadhya & Supriya RoyChowdhury (2022): Crafting new service workers: skill training, migration and employment in Bengaluru, India, Third World Quarterly, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2022.2077184](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2077184)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2077184>



Published online: 20 Jun 2022.



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Crafting new service workers: skill training, migration and employment in Bengaluru, India

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ABSTRACT

The paper documents the role of skill training centres in Bengaluru, India, in the production of a peripatetic and precarious workforce for India's new service economy. It describes how semi-educated youth from disadvantaged rural backgrounds are recruited for short-term training courses, which are promoted as a route to economic mobility, but are then placed in undesirable low-end and low-paid urban service jobs. Because the employment offered rarely matches their expectations or aspirations, graduates of training programmes often quit within a few weeks, returning to their home villages or searching for other job opportunities. The findings of the study suggest that skill training centres, rather than fulfilling their expressed goals of lifting rural youth out of poverty, contribute to the creation of a footloose and insecure workforce – thus catering to the requirements of organised service industries rather than the needs of unemployed youth. The paper contributes to current debates on youth unemployment, skill development, and labour precarity in the Global South.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 December 2021

Accepted 10 May 2022

KEYWORDS

Service sector
youth employment
India
Bengaluru
migration

This paper explores the role of private skill training centres in recruiting educated rural youth for low-end urban service-sector jobs in India. Drawing on a two-year study of the linkages between skill training, migration and employment in the new service economy in Bengaluru, India, we describe how skill training centres 'mobilise' young people from relatively marginalised rural households with the promise of decent employment and a brighter future. After undergoing short-term courses that impart limited job-specific and 'life' skills, trainees are placed in entry-level jobs in sectors such as big retail, hospitality, beauty and wellness, and back-office support services. The paper highlights the disconnect between the goals of skill training and the aspirations and expectations of trainees, who are routed into low-paying, insecure jobs with little opportunity for career growth or even economic stability. Consequently, these new workers move frequently from job to job and place to place in search of better pay or employment conditions, feeding into the growing peripatetic and precarious service workforce. Skill training centres thus replicate the role of labour contractors in the informal economy – providing a constant supply of 'flexible' and compliant workers – while doing little to address the growing problem of youth unemployment.

In the next section of the paper, we describe the restructuring of India's economy towards the tertiary sector and the concomitant growth of organised services, a domain that has

become the focus of skill development programmes. We also provide an overview of India's new skill development policy framework, highlighting the shift to short-term courses and quick job placement by private agencies. The third section provides an overview of our field sites – skill training centres – and the methodology employed in the study. The fourth section describes the recruitment strategies of skill centres and highlights the contrast between their stated goals – to lift marginalised youth out of poverty – and the actual social profile of students. In the fifth section, we discuss the training practices (especially in 'Life Skills') employed to mould students into compliant workers for the corporate service economy, highlighting the disjuncture between students' aspirations and expectations of skill training and the objectives of the organisations. The sixth section describes the placement process that channels trainees into insecure, low-paid service jobs and explores the transition into the workplace, highlighting the negative experiences that lead many to quit the job and return home. In the concluding section we reflect on the role of skill training in the production of a fluid, footloose and precarious service workforce.

Restructuring of India's economy, unemployment and the new skill policy paradigm

Since the institution of economic reforms in India in the 1990s, the Indian economy has undergone significant restructuring, with the expansion of the service sector relative to industry and the disinvestment in public sector industries. While the contribution of agriculture to the gross domestic product (GDP) declined from 23% in 1999–2000 to 14–15% in 2011–2019, the proportion of the population dependent on agriculture has remained disproportionately high, with its share in employment declining slowly from 58% in 1999–2000, to 49% in 2011–2012 and 42% in 2019 (Basole and Narayan 2020). This incomplete or slow structural transformation is connected to the overall lack of job opportunities in the other two sectors of the economy. Between 2011–2012 and 2018–2019, India's manufacturing sector recorded a decline in jobs of 3.3 million, and its share of employment fell from 12.6% to 12.1% of the total workforce (Kapoor 2018; Mehrotra and Parida 2021). Although the tertiary sector (services) now provides 57% of India's GDP, employment in services has not kept pace, increasing from 23.4% in 2004 to only 30.2% in 2018 (Basole et al. 2018, 82). Thus, the decline of employment in agriculture and industry has not been offset by an increase in service sector jobs, as had been anticipated (Mehrotra and Parida 2021). This trend of 'jobless growth' (Kannan and Raveendran 2019), in a context of rising levels of education and youth aspirations, has contributed to the severe crisis of unemployment in India. The overall unemployment rate increased from 2.2% from 2011 to 2012 to 5.8% in 2018–2019, while youth unemployment grew from 6.1% to 17.3% in the same period.

These structural changes of the post-liberalisation period have been accompanied by a relaxation of labour laws and regulations and a growth in casual and contractual employment, even within the 'organised sector'. Most service sector employment is in low-value-added services, with high-value-added services accounting for only 7% of the workforce (Saraf 2016, 17). The workforce is also increasingly casualised and insecure – the percentage of service-sector employees with written contracts (tenable for three years) fell from 64% in 2004–2005 to 28% in 2011–2012, while the proportion of those without any contract rose from 29% to 56% during the same period (Srivastava and Naik 2017, 202–204).

Even as unemployment is increasing amongst educated youth, employers across various sectors complain about the paucity of skilled human resources. One explanation for this paradox is that many educated jobseekers have obtained general (and often substandard) college degrees or have only basic 10th or 12th standard qualifications, making them poorly equipped for the kinds of jobs they desire (Basole et al. 2019, 16–17). These semi-educated youth require further training to make them ‘job ready’, a gap that recent skill development policies and initiatives have attempted to bridge.

India's new skills paradigm

The ‘Skill India Mission’ and related policy initiatives pushed by the Government of India have sought to address both the crisis of unemployment and the perceived issue of ‘unemployability’. In 2008, the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) initiated a new public–private model for skill training, which was also reflected in the 2009 National Policy on Skill Development as well as the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship introduced in 2015, with the goal of skilling 402 million workers by 2022 (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship 2015). This inaugurated a significant shift in the skill development domain. While vocational education through government-managed industrial training institutes (ITIs) continues to be an important dimension of skill training, the new policy framework promotes training delivery in a wide range of skill through private non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and for-profit agencies, supported by government, corporate and charitable funding. The central government’s flagship scheme – Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), which is implemented by the NSDC – provides investments and soft loans to private entities to conduct training. These private agencies are reimbursed only when they meet targets such as graduating and placing (and retaining) students in jobs. This national policy framework has been replicated by state governments in their own skill development policies, leading to a proliferation of short-term courses of varying quality and creating a highly complex and varied institutional structure for skill development.

Although a range of government skill training programmes and vocational education institutions still function, the new framework has promoted short-term skilling and certification programmes to the relative neglect of deeper and longer-term vocational and technical education leading to stable industrial or skilled employment (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship 2016). According to Ruthven (2018, 316), the ‘supply-led and target-driven orientation’ of the national skill policy has created a bias towards short-term ‘top-up’ courses for youth with secondary or ITI qualifications. Training centres have little incentive to offer longer-term courses because trainees would then have to be placed in jobs that pay a significantly higher wage. Several assessments of the new policy framework suggest that most skill development programmes are designed from the perspective of business and employers, with little attention to the needs of trainees or the realities of local economies (Maithreyi et al. 2019; Sadagopal 2016; Saraf 2016). Gooptu (2018, 243) argues that the national skill policy aims to ‘reconcile a scheme for private sector profit by supplying trained labour to employers ... with a welfare measure for employment and livelihood generation’. Thus, skill training has become big business, yet the wider implications of this ‘highly privatised, demand-driven skills economy’ (Maithreyi et al. 2019, 134) have not been adequately assessed.

In addition, many short-term skill courses are oriented toward filling jobs in the ‘new service economy’ (Basole et al. 2018, 20), which are highly insecure and low-paid. India’s

cities have seen a proliferation of consumption-orientated 'organised services', such as hospitality, big retail, beauty and wellness, housekeeping, transportation, and security services, catering to the growing urban middle class (in Bangalore, driven largely by the growth of the software services industry). These lower-end services have been increasingly professionalised and corporatised (Baas and Cayla 2020), and in some cases 'platformised' (Surie 2020) – creating seemingly attractive employment opportunities for young people with 10th standard education. Indeed, job growth in the services sector showed an upward trend between 2011–2012 and 2017–2018 (Azim Premji University 2021, 45), and the share of 'formal' youth employment in this sector increased from 21% in 2004–2005 to 31% in 2017–2018 (Mehrotra and Parida 2019, 14) – creating expectations that low-end services might address the unemployment problem.

The growing demand for urban service workers has engendered new patterns of rural–urban, urban–urban, and temporary migration, as youth with a range of skills and educational backgrounds flow into cities in search of jobs. However, with large numbers of educated youth entering the labour force and the circulation of new aspirations and consumer lifestyles (Brown et al. 2017; Mankekar 2015), their expectations are often not matched by available opportunities. Observers note that many rural youth have turned away from agriculture and urban informal self-employment – occupations that traditionally absorbed large numbers of workers – and aspire to secure scarce 'office' or government jobs (Basole and Jayadev 2019). Instead, they often end up in low-end services as salespersons, delivery personnel, drivers, call centre agents or beauticians.

Research on workers and employment in low-end organised services in India is in a nascent stage. Sociological studies have explored how inequalities of social class, rural–urban or regional identity or language shape employees' work experiences in sectors such as retail and hospitality, where customer service interactions are often permeated by social class hierarchies and experiences of humiliation (Bardalai 2021). Less has been written about employment conditions in the new service industries, which even in large corporate organisations are marked by elements of informality such as weak implementation of labour laws, absence of formal contracts and labour unions, and high rates of employee turnover – what Gooptu (2013) terms 'organised informality'. Pointing to the creation of a 'precariat' within the corporate sector, Gooptu argues that precariousness refers not only to job insecurity or contractualisation of employment, but also to the 'lack of a secure niche in the labour market and the absence of steady occupational and employment opportunities relating to a particular set of skills, thus preventing upward social mobility and a stable career trajectory' (Gooptu 2013, 11). Although compensation and employment conditions vary across different service industries, all are broadly characterised by job insecurity and the extractive role of contracting agencies (RoyChowdhury and Vani 2016).

While service-sector employment is often informalised, the recruitment and training of workers has been extensively professionalised – carried out by private employment and training agencies (which may draw on government resources). The formalisation and standardisation of occupational categories, such as security and housekeeping staff, by training and recruitment agencies aims to prepare workers 'to plug into their clients' aspirations and expectations of "good service"' (Raval and Pal 2019, 3). Moreover, because the urban service economy is expected to absorb large numbers of educated youth, skill centres have moved away from courses leading to manual skilled jobs such as plumber and electrician and focus on training modules oriented to service-sector employment. However, our research,

presented below, raises questions about this skill training paradigm, the quality and sustainability of such service-sector employment, and whether organised services are providing the opportunities semi-educated youth seek.

Field sites and methodology

The proliferation of private and government organisations in the skill training domain has given rise to a complex 'skills ecosystem' (as an interlocutor put it) that varies across Indian cities. Several hundred private skill training centres in Bengaluru include for-profit firms as well as non-profits. While many NGOs receive government funds through programmes such as PMKVY, corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds constitute another major source of funding.

Comprehensive data on the activities of skill development organisations in Bengaluru are not available, but interviews with key informants indicate that their courses are designed mainly to prepare students for service jobs such as in retail sales, transportation, back-office customer support services, and personal services such as beauty and home health care. This focus reflects the post-1990s economic structure of the city, where employment is increasingly dominated by the tertiary sector with the demise of industry and the public sector (Narayana 2011; RoyChowdhury 2003). Reflecting the requirements of jobs in 'organised' services, skill centres mostly recruit youth with 10th standard education or above. However, some centres also provide training in construction-related vocations such as plumbing, or in industrial skills such as welding or auto repair.

To investigate the linkages between skill training, migration and urban employment, we worked closely with four Bengaluru-based training organisations. Through a longitudinal case study approach, we assembled a cohort of around 100 trainees who were interviewed periodically over a period of 12–18 months, from the time they joined the centres and following them through the training period and into the workforce. This strategy allowed us to document students' initial expectations and their experiences of training and job placement, as well as their aspirations for the future. We also interviewed several leaders and key personnel of the skill training centres, HR [human resources] managers of employing companies, and other key informants, observed training programmes, and conducted focus group discussions. A second component of the study was carried out in towns and rural areas of Raichur district, a 'backward' district of northern Karnataka which is a key source of migrant workers in Bengaluru, to document the socio-economic backgrounds of trainees and their mobility strategies. Third, we constructed in-depth case studies of smaller cohorts of employees and workplaces in two selected sectors in Bengaluru – beauty and wellness and organised retail.

Poverty alleviation through skill training?

Of the four Bengaluru-based skill centres we studied, three are non-profits or charitable organisations and one is a for-profit company. 'SkillConnect' and 'Pragati' are older, large organisations with skill centres across the country, while 'Move-Up' is smaller and a new entrant to the field. The centres all offer short-term courses varying from two to three months in duration, which are free, subsidised or fee-paying depending on their target clientele. All the centres offer guaranteed job placement. Their students are recruited mainly from rural parts of Karnataka (especially the more impoverished districts) as well as low-income urban

households. The non-for-profit skill centres are funded, in varying proportions, by government funds and charitable and corporate donations.

The non-profit skill development organisations are driven by a clear social purpose – to address the issues of poverty and unemployment through skill training. The founders of 'Move-Up'¹ had left lucrative corporate careers to work in social development, and their perspectives on development issues and management style reflect this background. In interviews, senior managers asserted that poverty alleviation can only be achieved by equipping students for service jobs in metropolitan cities. 'Rahul', a founder of Move-Up, argued that rural areas do not offer any opportunities, hence employment in the 'formal economy' is the only route to social and economic mobility. They believe that the urban service economy offers the best options for young people who have completed schooling but have no other qualifications or technical training. Move-up offers courses they believe will lead to 'scalable' jobs, or which have potential for entrepreneurship, such as Beauty and Driving, but avoid sectors such as security services where there is 'no possibility of progression'. Yet, as we show below, the jobs in which their students are placed also offer little prospect for career mobility.

All four skill centres offer similar courses, with titles such as Administrative Assistant, Sales Management, Retail Sales, Business Associate, Driving, Hospitality and Guest Care, and Beauty – all aimed at lower-end service-sector jobs. Their graduates are placed in retail stores, domestic call centres, beauty parlours, chain coffee shops and fast-food restaurants, and transportation companies, mainly in Bengaluru. Although the courses are supposed to impart job-relevant skill sets and industry-specific knowledge, we found significant convergence in the content of courses as well as placements. For instance, all the courses include modules on Spoken English, Computers and Life Skills, and the graduates of 'Administrative Assistant' and 'Sales Management' courses are placed in broadly the same kinds of jobs, such as retail and back-office support services. This homogeneity suggests that the aim of training programmes is not so much to teach specific vocational skills as to impart broad communicative and personal skills and orientations required to work in the consumption-oriented urban service economy.

Mobilising the youth

In their recruitment, publicity and fund-raising materials, skill centres narrate stories about young people who have achieved their dreams and been lifted out of poverty after completing training and entering urban employment. Training centre staff believe that they are putting young people on a path of upward mobility, and they pursue their work with passion and sometimes evangelical zeal. However, 'mobilising' (or recruiting) young people to join skill training courses is not an easy task. Despite offering free or subsidised training and guaranteed job placement, they find it difficult to recruit students.

All the four centres we studied have dedicated 'mobilisation teams' that regularly visit small towns and villages in 'backward' regions, such as districts of northern Karnataka, to recruit trainees, targeting young men and women in the age group 18–25 years who have attained at least 10th standard education. They also run mobilisation drives in Bengaluru slums, but with less success – recruiters believe that 'unemployed' low-income urban youth are not attracted to the kinds of jobs they offer because they have other, easier ways to make money. In contrast, rural youth would be less familiar with the employment options available in the city. Moreover, leaders of skill centres and trainers regard rural youth as

malleable and submissive, which is another reason they focus on bringing young people from rural areas and equipping them with the minimum skills needed to work in the urban service economy.

Mobilisation teams employ various tactics to persuade young people and their parents of the value of their courses and the desirability of the jobs on offer. This is a particularly difficult task in rural areas, where people are often suspicious of their motives in offering free training and job placement in Bangalore, especially for girls. Their target families in remote areas are often unfamiliar with the kinds of service-sector jobs they are offering. Mobilisers screen videos and display colourful brochures to show potential recruits what to expect and to motivate them. Their 'marketing' strategies highlight optimistic stories of young people who have achieved their dreams and been lifted out of poverty through training and urban employment. Accompanying a mobilisation team to rural Raichur, our research assistants observed that the team worked tirelessly, walking from house to house armed with a binder containing information about the centre and filled with images of former students on their graduation day. Motivators are given targets for the number of students they should recruit for each batch and receive incentives based on the number signed up.

Despite these efforts, mobilisation teams face challenges filling their quotas. Apart from resistance from family members, skill centre staff members attribute the reluctance of young people to enrol in training to their 'low aspiration levels'. They believe that youth in rural areas lead 'comfortable lives' – their basic needs are taken care of by their parents, and they can just 'roam around' with their friends, hence they are not motivated to acquire new skills: 'If they wanted to do something, they would have done it long ago ... If our team hadn't gone and got them here, they would still be sitting at home ... Motivation and inspiration are a bit less here'.

Contrary to the views of mobilisers and trainers, our findings point to strong aspirations for social mobility in this group. Most of the trainees interviewed were motivated by the prospects of learning or improving their spoken English, which they believed is necessary for most jobs they may seek (cf. Datta 2021). They were also attracted by the chance to acquire computer skills and the guaranteed job placement. Moreover, almost all respondents had attained higher levels of education than their parents, many of whom had not completed 10th standard. Most of the parents were small farmers, agricultural labourers, skilled or unskilled wage workers, low-level government employees, or self-employed, and they had invested in education for their children which (it was hoped) would lead to non-agricultural and non-manual employment. It is this desire for mobility that skill centres tap in to in their recruitment drives.

Despite the considerable resources devoted to direct mobilisation, we found that most students were recruited through other channels such as referrals by family or friends (usually those who had undergone similar training), advertisements circulated through social media and newspapers, and job fairs – again indicating their own motivation to undergo training.

Social profile of students

The skill centres claim to offer training only to youth from BPL (below poverty line) households. However, we found that most students do not meet the organisations' own criteria for recruitment. For instance, they are supposed to target landless households, but we found

that about half of our cohort's families owned some land. Also, the fact that most respondents had completed 10th or 12th standard indicates that their families had the financial capacity to keep at least one son or daughter in school for a long period. In our cohort of respondents, the largest proportion had studied up to 10th class, followed by Pre-University Course (PUC) or 12th standard, while a few had college degrees or technical diplomas and three even had master's degrees. A Move-Up placement officer acknowledged the contradiction between their professed aim of poverty alleviation and the reality of their students' socio-economic background: 'These people come from such a background that they don't have to work ... they have survived all these years sitting at home.'

Although our cohort of trainees did not come from the lowest economic strata, most did belong to socially marginalised or lower-caste communities (an important correlate of economic status and relative disadvantage in India): one-third identified themselves as 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC) and one-third as Scheduled Castes or Tribes (SC/ST).² Around 70% were recruited from outside Bengaluru – around one-half from rural areas and the rest from other cities and towns of southern India. Two-thirds of respondents were male and one-third female, and most were in the age group of 18 to 25 years.

Our data suggest that skill centres carefully target young people from rural areas, small towns or urban slums who lack the qualifications or resources to pursue higher education and enter more desirable middle-class occupations, or to compete for government jobs, but who have sufficient education and ambition to fill jobs in coffee shops, retail stores or small beauty parlours. Although the Indian education system does not compulsorily track students into vocational education if they fail 10th- or 12th-class examinations, the current paradigm of skill training seems to perform a function like that of vocational education in other countries. In China, for example, students who fail in the examinations that provide entry into higher education are channelled into vocational training, which does not lead to well-paid, secure industrial employment but instead prepares them for life as an urban underclass (Woronov 2016). Similarly, Bengaluru skill training centres target young people from disadvantaged families whose educational backgrounds – even if they have completed 10th or 12th standards or even college – are inadequate to propel them into professional or middle-class occupations. The stark inequalities that mark the Indian education system (Chopra and Jeffery 2005) also lead to differentiated employment (or unemployment) pathways and contribute to the segmentation of the labour market along lines of caste, class and regional or rural/urban origin (Kaur and Sundar 2016; Upadhy 2016).

Fashioning appropriate service workers

Skill centre leaders and staff emphasise the transformative nature of the training, which aims not only to prepare students for the world of work but also to change their 'mindset' and attitudes – viewed as a necessary step to becoming successful corporate employees. These attitudes and 'skills' are imparted mainly through the Life Skills component of the skill training courses.

The notion of 'life skills' derives from a staple of the corporate world – 'soft skills training' – which is meant to produce autonomous, self-driven 'entrepreneurial' worker-subjects (Goptu 2009, 2013) and empowered citizens (Desai 2020). Such corporate and middle-class values or orientations may be assimilated by service workers as part of their own projects of self-making and social mobility (Baas 2020; Bardalai 2021). However, the aim of soft skills

training in these centres is quite different – it is oriented more to creating compliant workers who have inculcated the values of (self-)discipline and obedience to management, as well as certain norms and habits of grooming, personal hygiene, self-presentation and customer service needed to fit into the corporate service workplace (Raval and Pai 2019). Life Skills modules include topics such as: ‘The power of a positive attitude’, ‘Goal setting: making it happen’, ‘Stress management’, and ‘Being a good team player’. Significantly, anger management is another component of these lessons, as students are taught to exert self-control in the face of even unfair reprimands from the boss or customers’ rude remarks, in the interest of their ‘careers’. This module is considered particularly important for students from rural backgrounds, who are thought to lack the psychological orientations and emotional maturity needed to participate in modern urban life and work.

Training is also oriented to helping students adjust to unfamiliar work environments and to the city. Skill centres recognise that new recruits (especially those from rural areas) face many challenges after being placed in jobs in unfamiliar spaces such as shopping malls and beauty parlours. They attempt to develop in them emotional capacities such as ‘determination’ and ‘perseverance’, or the ability to withstand hardships, through Life Skills lessons that emphasise the importance of cultivating self-discipline, stamina, and ‘grit’. Because skill centres are aware that fresh recruits often quit their jobs soon after placement, they devote considerable energy to preparing them for the realities of work in the service economy, moulding their attitudes and motivating them to persist in the face of adversity, even when they find the work onerous or demeaning. Move-Up has developed specific training techniques to help students manage what they term ‘migration shock’ and ‘workplace shock’, which they believe contribute to high attrition rates.

Thus, Life Skills training does not aim to produce ‘entrepreneurial’ autonomous subjects but docile worker-subjects who accept the authority of managers and the drudgery, poor working conditions, and low salaries of service-sector jobs. While claiming to mould the personalities and habits of trainees to help them succeed, training courses are fine-tuned to the realities of the new service economy, which offers only insecure, low-paid jobs and virtually no career path (discussed below). Trainees are exhorted to stick with even stressful and dead-end jobs in the interests of long-term career development – a prospect that workers soon realise is quite unrealistic.

‘Raising aspirations’ and ‘lowering expectations’

Despite the emphasis during recruitment drives on ‘raising aspirations’, the first few days of training typically focus on ‘lowering expectations’. Students enter training with high expectations about the kinds of jobs and salaries they will get, only to be informed later that they are unlikely to land a ‘good job’ right away, given their lack of English proficiency and or work experience. They are urged to accept whatever placement is offered, even if the salary is low and the work tedious, to gain work experience. Further, career counselling mainly consists of admonitions to be patient and to tolerate a low-paid and tedious job in the interest of longer-term career development.

To counter these harsh lessons and inspire the trainees, successful alumni are invited to speak to students and tell their own stories – of starting out at a salary of Rs. 8000 and eventually growing into a good sales job earning Rs. 35,000 per month, or about moving from an arduous outdoor sales job to an indoor desk job. The urban service economy is presented

as a field of endless possibilities, where anyone can succeed if they persist and learn to bear hardships while always looking out for the next opportunity. Nonetheless, the dissonance between what is promised by skill centres and what students experience during training and after entering the workforce leads to high drop-out rates – both during training and after placement.

Mismatches between students' aspirations and expectations, the goals of skill training, and the realities of the job market occur at several levels.³ First, many students articulated ambitions that were sharply out of tune with the objectives of the skill centres. For example, they planned to pursue higher education (B.Com, MBA) with the aim of becoming an accountant or HR manager, or they were studying to pass the entrance exams leading to government or bank jobs (public-sector employment being the ultimate dream of many young people in India). Many students joined these short-term training courses with the expectation of acquiring skills (such as spoken English) that would help them achieve these goals.

Second, several respondents viewed urban service jobs not as a career choice but as a short-term strategy to earn money to help them pursue their real goals, or to provide support for their families at home. For example, students whose families owned land in their native villages planned to save money to dig a borewell or buy a specific piece of farming equipment, after which they would return home and engage in agriculture. Others spoke about opening a small business in their hometown, such as a taxi service. The disjuncture between students' aspirations and the outcomes of skill training is clearly recognised by organisation leaders and trainers, who attempt to address their disappointment and unrealistic expectations through 'Life Skills' and other components of the training.

Creating a service labour force: skill centres as labour market intermediaries

Graduates of the skill centres we studied are placed in jobs located almost exclusively in Bengaluru. Retail and Sales Management graduates are placed in a wide range of jobs, from customer-facing retail sales jobs in department stores and supermarkets to back-office service centres, call centres and fast-food outlets. Administrative Assistant students are typically channelled into tele-sales, voice and non-voice processes in domestic business process outsourcing units (BPOs) and clerical positions. Beauty trainees are recruited by small, low- to middle-range salons, while Driving students generally get jobs only with 'on-call' companies (which supply temporary drivers to clients) because they can apply for a taxi driver licence only one year after obtaining a regular driving licence. Starting salaries in our cohort were in the range of Rs. 8000–12,000 per month for retail and back-office jobs, Rs. 8000 for driving jobs, and as low as Rs. 6000 at beauty salons.

To facilitate job placement, skill centres have tie-ups with 'placement partners' – companies that regularly recruit from them. This strategy is important because many service-sector employers do not prefer to hire from NGO training centres that recruit students from underprivileged or rural backgrounds, who are believed to require additional training inputs. An HR manager we interviewed suggested that there is no difference between workers who have been 'trained' at skill centres and others hired simply as 'walk-ins' – casting doubt on the value of such training. However, several representatives of employing companies expressed a preference for hiring from NGO skill centres because their graduates are believed to be 'desperate' for jobs and so would be more 'loyal': 'We try to find out why they want the job, how much they are contributing to their families, have they come to Bangalore

because they need to work'. According to a staffing company executive, urban youth are averse to working in big retail because it requires standing on one's feet all day and salaries are low, while young people from rural areas are more likely to tolerate such working conditions. An HR executive noted that they prefer to hire from skill centres because they train 'people from poor backgrounds' who have 'an intention, passion and desire to work – they have the fire in the belly'. According to another respondent: 'We are not looking for someone who is a hundred percent fit, but somebody who is good enough, who has got the right attitude, who is trainable, who we can mould...'

Thus, skill centres cater to a demand for malleable, relatively unskilled but 'desperate' workers who are likely to be 'loyal', by bringing youth from rural areas, inculcating in them the required orientations and 'soft skills', and then channelling them into the service-sector labour market. As Ruthven (2018) argues, training programmes are not so much about developing skills as providing employers with a constant flow of casual workers, 'thereby stabilizing their workforce in an era where the "permanent worker" is no longer an acceptable or viable category' (2018, 315). Our findings similarly highlight the 'disconnect between the declared intent of government "skills" policy and the way in which it is actually realized, from the viewpoint of employer, student and vocational training provider' (2018, 315).

From training to workplace: dissonance and discontent

While the stated goal of skill centres is to place students in well-paid, secure jobs, what is on offer is mainly contractual employment with low starting salaries and few (if any) benefits. Students are assured that after gaining some work experience and improving their spoken English and other skills they will be able to advance into better jobs. Yet we found little evidence that rural youth who entered the urban service economy through the skill training route are equipped to find a foothold in the city or forge stable careers.

The sharp mismatch between students' aspirations, their expectations of skills training, and their experiences after joining the workforce largely explains the high rates of 'attrition'. Several respondents expressed resentment about the kind of job they were placed in or the salary level. The typical starting salary was Rs. 10,000 to 12,000 but it was often as low as Rs. 6000 per month. According to the head of one training centre, students are aware that they could make more money even in semi-skilled construction jobs, which makes the pay in service jobs seem even more inadequate. Discontent was expressed especially by those who had been employed previously and had enrolled in training with the expectation that it would help them land better jobs. When asked whether the training had been useful, one student responded, 'We learnt a few things – that is it. It has not helped us much at work'. Another complained that the course was a 'loss' for him because he still ended up in a low-paying job: 'Move-Up training was a waste of time! I could have earned Rs. 45,000 in the three months I spent there'. Another graduate, speaking about her bitter experience, said, 'Who will work in these bad jobs? We could have stayed back in our native place and found a job close by'.

Respondents with prior work experience were able to compare their placements with what is available in the market. According to a student of Pragati's Administrative Assistant course, they had expected to be placed in the preferred 'non-voice' operations of BPOs, such as insurance claim processing. Instead, most jobs offered were in domestic call centres (in

'voice' functions), a less prestigious and more stressful role involving direct customer interaction. A trainee observed:

What hurt me about Pragati was that they are providing only voice-based jobs. There are many who have degrees and they can definitely be given non-voice jobs. They are also giving Rs. 7000 to 8000 which is very cheap. With a degree they should get at least Rs. 12,000 in hand. I don't know what's the use of sending them [trainees] to call centres. I feel they are forcing them into it.

This narrative reflects the perception of several trainees that skill centres were routing them into the least desirable jobs, such as direct retail (working on the shop floor or outdoor sales jobs, considered inferior to 'desk jobs') or live customer care jobs in call centres – adding to their disillusionment.

Similarly, several Beauty graduates reported negative experiences with their placements, such as getting paid less than what was promised. They were typically placed as 'helpers' rather than as 'beauticians', and in small neighbourhood beauty parlours rather than large chain salons, with salaries of Rs. 6000–8000 per month, without written contracts or job security. Moreover, several stated that they were assigned all kinds of work, from cleaning the salon to even domestic service at the owner's home, rather than utilising their 'skills'. Because there was hardly any on-the-job training, our respondents found it difficult to cross the barrier from semi-skilled work in small salons to more skilled and better-paid work in corporate chains.

These findings illustrate the deep disconnect between aspirations, expectations and reality at several levels – between trainees' expectations of skill training, the goals of the skill centres, and the actual training imparted; and between their aspirations and the jobs that were offered (cf. Brown 2020a, 2020b; Powell and McGrath 2014). As a placement officer said:

The starting level of my students is really very low. So, making them improve so much in three months is really difficult. There are thousands of graduates who pass out every year from colleges in Bangalore which are English medium ... matching up to them is difficult They don't realise that we can teach them basic computers, but not enough to get a job where you are working just on computers. So, Sales Management students get retail jobs, or work in BPOs in tele-calling or data entry Students want bank jobs, but again the role will be telemarketing etc As time goes on, they realise that it's not easy to get jobs. Their self-esteem and confidence go down.

'Sujatha', director of SkillConnect, acknowledged that certification alone does not lead to a wage premium, nor does skill training in most cases. The most important factor is job experience, hence they try to motivate students to stick to whatever job they get: 'The first job will never give you what you aspire for – you have to handhold them for a period of time and build technical capacity because vocational work is paid on the basis of experience ... never on knowledge'. Yet we found that skill centres do not provide long-term 'hand-holding' or adequate support for their graduates after job placement, contributing to the high attrition rate. A respondent reported:

My self-confidence completely came down after I approached Pragati and the trainer scolded me for leaving the job – I left the centre in tears. I am disappointed with the centre for not keeping up their promise of providing a good job.

These findings resonate with the work of Nambiar (2013, 2021) and Cross (2009), who found that recruitment strategies and training programmes often create unrealistic expectations amongst young workers, who later find themselves in low-paid, onerous and dead-end jobs. Trainers' efforts to 'manage expectations' point to a clear contradiction between what is promised during recruitment and the kinds of jobs that are available to young people with inadequate cultural capital. Our findings also suggest that many students would not have joined the courses if they had been given a clear picture of placements – and that they are not sufficiently 'desperate' that they would do any kind of work at any pay. While trainers believe that these young people have 'unrealistic' expectations, students' own narratives indicate what they value and aspire for – a well-paying, secure job, the capacity to support their family, and a respectable form of employment – which, for educated youth, generally precludes manual labour (Jeffrey 2010). This situation, in turn, contributes to the fluidity and instability of the service workforce, where workers generally tend to shift frequently between jobs in search of better pay or working conditions.

Work experiences, attrition and circulation of labour

The transition from training to workplace proved to be difficult, and in some cases impossible, for the students in our cohort. Despite trainers' efforts to prepare them for the 'shocks' of working in a domestic call centre, a large retail store or a neighbourhood beauty parlour, the issues they faced after joining work led a large number to leave their jobs – often within a few weeks. Although we had planned to track a sub-sample of the cohort after job placement to understand their work experiences, in many cases we were unable to contact them because they had quit the job and moved elsewhere, while several had not even joined the organisations where they were placed. Follow-up interviews conducted three to six months after placement (with those we could trace) revealed that very few were still working in their original jobs, although nearly half were employed in jobs related to the field in which they had been 'trained'. A significant number of graduates (one-fourth) were unemployed, while three students were pursuing further education.

After quitting, several respondents had sought other jobs in Bengaluru or other cities, but a large proportion had simply gone back to their home villages. A major reason given for returning home is the high cost of living in Bengaluru, especially for housing. Most students from outside the city intended to send some of their earnings to their families, but their low salaries did not allow them to save money after paying for rent, transportation, and other living costs. In addition, a large proportion of respondents said that if jobs were available, they would prefer to live and work near their hometowns or villages. Most respondents had no intention of settling down in a metropolitan city like Bengaluru – contrary to the expectations of skill training providers and popular ideas about the aspirations of rural youth.

Skill centres readily acknowledge that 'retention' (in the job) is a major issue. The three-month retention rate (the benchmark for 'successful' completion of the course) documented by Move-Up for their graduates was 54% for Sales, 46% for Beauty, and 42% for Driving trainees. To address this issue, training centres have devised various strategies to encourage their students to stick to the job: 'We want the students to stay in the job because we believe that that's the first step. In fact, the idea is not employment in the same profession they are

trained in, the objective is continuous employment'. One centre even retains students' original school leaving certificates (collected at the time of admission) until they have completed three months in the job, which prevents them from seeking other employment. Skill centres claim that they take such measures for the students' own benefit, but the emphasis on retention stems from other reasons: First, skill training organisations receive placement fees from the employing companies only after the candidate stays in the job for three months. Second, funding agencies require them to show successful placement and retention (usually for three months) to claim reimbursement for their expenses.

Thus, although skill centres emphasise that students should 'persevere' in the job for their own good, they also cater to the requirements of service industries for a 'flexible', non-permanent, but constantly replenished workforce. For instance, HR managers in the retail sector acknowledged that they do not invest in training employees or take steps to enhance retention because new workers can always be hired and quickly put on the job as employees leave. The fluidity of these new workforces ultimately benefits employers because most workers are on low, entry-level salaries. Big retail companies claim to offer a potential career path for employees who 'stick to the job', according to an HR manager, but 'not many stay around long enough to move up'. In the beauty industry as well, additional training and work experience might allow a worker to move into a higher position carrying a better salary, but such a trajectory was not available to our cohort of beautician graduates because these skill centres provide only general training in a range of beautician services, rather than specialised training, limiting their prospects of career mobility. Thus, across most service industries, the precarity of employment, low levels of pay (insufficient to sustain migrant workers in the city), and onerous working and living conditions have created a highly mobile and unstable workforce (cf. Srivastava 2020).

Sectors such as organised retail, hospitality, transport and back-office customer services seem to thrive on the availability of temporary, contractual workers recruited from outside the city. Interviews with employers revealed that they struggle to find sufficient local candidates willing to work at existing salary levels, so they actively seek employees from smaller cities, provincial towns and villages who are seen as more needy and less demanding. Skill training centres are aware of these motivations, yet they continue to channel their students into these jobs because that is what is available – undermining their own goals of providing a pathway to upward mobility through urban employment and instead catering to the market demand for a low-wage, semi-skilled and fluid workforce.

Conclusion: what do skill training organisations actually do?

In this paper we have shown how skill training centres facilitate the flow of educated young people from rural areas and small towns of India into the new service workforce in Bengaluru, a large metropolitan city. This suggests that they function as labour market intermediaries by sourcing potential workers, providing some basic training (mostly in 'soft skills'), introduction to the corporate workplace and a few job-oriented skills, and then placing them in low-paid, insecure jobs. In this way, skill centres contribute to the production of the mobile and malleable workforces on which corporatised service industries thrive.

We have also argued that skill training programmes are designed to refashion the subjectivities and attitudes of trainees, moulding them into disciplined employees who are equipped to handle the difficulties of daily life in the city, speak at least a smattering

of English, and conduct themselves according to the requirements of the corporate workplace. Students are urged to develop qualities such as 'grit' to sustain a lonely, migrant life in an alien city and an unfamiliar work environment. But such 'life skills' training does not prepare them for the realities of the service-sector job market, which is highly labour surplus and marked by the near absence of labour rights or possibility of collective action.

This study suggests that instability, precarity and fluidity are features not only of the India's huge informal economy but also of many organised services such as big retail, transportation and logistics, and customer support services – businesses that profit from having access to a large and mobile pool of potential workers. Despite high attrition rates, these companies have little incentive to enhance salaries or train existing employees for better roles because new workers can be easily hired and put to work with little training. In response, workers move from job to job, sector to sector, and place to place in search of better jobs and pay.

Our findings highlight the changing formations and conditions of labour as the Indian economy has been restructured towards services, labour laws liberalised, and as the agrarian crisis pushes more and more rural youth to seek work in cities and towns. They also suggest that the current skill paradigm, which ostensibly aims to address the unemployment crisis, seems to exacerbate the precarity of labour – even as more sectors become corporatised and training programmes are restructured to service the needs of employers rather than workers.

Finally, the study highlights the need for more research on skill training in relation to changing patterns of employment and social mobility, particularly to map how 'skill acquisition and employment are influenced by existing forms of inequality and social institutions such as caste and gender' (Gooptu 2018, 247). While we have no space here to elaborate on this theme, our insights into the creation of a mobile and insecure service workforce through skill training suggests that such interventions, instead of fostering social and economic mobility, contribute to the reproduction of larger structures of inequality. For example, skill centres tap into regional inequalities by bringing youth from 'backward' rural districts to major cities, as well as inequalities of caste and class by drawing trainees from marginalised communities and low-income households, to provide low-end service labour in the city. These inequalities are then manifested in new segmentations of the urban labour force which are yet to be fully explored.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on a research project entitled *India's Changing Cityscapes: Work, Migration and Livelihoods*, carried out by researchers at the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC) and the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru, between 2017 and 2019. The study was funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), which the authors thank for their support. We also gratefully acknowledge the important contributions of our research team: Sazana Jayadeva, Prajwal Nagesh, Vishaka Warriar, Harpreet Kaur and Pragati Tiwari.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for all persons and institutions mentioned in this paper.
2. SC, ST and OBC are official categories designating marginalised communities in India.
3. During interviews, we posed questions that distinguished between *aspirations*, understood as respondents' articulations about or hopes for their futures, and *expectations*, or their understanding of how training might benefit them in the shorter term, such as in terms of better jobs or pay or improved knowledge.

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