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Transforming Education
for Sustainable Futures

LEARNING, LIVELIHOOD AND POSSIBILITIES OF SOCIALLY JUST PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

This report reflects our ongoing collaborative research and action engagements in education. Three overlapping interests are at the centre of our inquiry: (a) the relationship between education and work; (b) the transformation of small towns in Maharashtra and the changing role of education therein; and (c) vocational and skill-based programmes in small towns. Anchored in the south-western town of Sangli, Maharashtra, our work focuses on various institutional arrangements in vocational and skill-based education. By mapping the educational landscape, the report also highlights the experiences of students who traverse the domains of work and education.

Scholars of diverse disciplinary persuasions have pointed out the intensification of economic and social changes that have occurred since the late 1980s in India. Driven by the imperatives of the global economy, economic liberalisation severely affected a number of domestic sectors. Agriculture and related sectors saw large-scale movement of labour towards non-agrarian livelihoods that also resulted in a consistent increase in short-term, circuitous and at times long-term migration to urban and semi-urban locales. Similarly, there have also been significant shifts that have occurred in education over the course of the past three decades, propelling a change in the social, cultural and economic realms. The desire and demand for quality education has become apparent, while state provisioning of education has gone down and privatisation has occurred at a fast pace.

THE CITY IN DIFFICULT TIMES: EDUCATION, LIVELIHOODS AND JUSTICE

On a cold Sunday morning in October 2019, Central School in Sangli, Maharashtra was abuzz with a flurry of activity. In a day-long meeting that was attended by district officials, representatives of local and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and administrators of skill development centres and philanthropic organisations, there was a consensus to start short-term courses. The meeting had a rather grim context. In the month of August 2019, several towns in south-western Maharashtra and north Karnataka witnessed unprecedented floods as the Krishna River roared in, submerging farms, homes, buildings and roadways. Sangli was among the worst-hit districts as the flood altered people's lives and livelihoods significantly. It was decided that short-term courses would be instituted as part of relief and rebuilding efforts as the district suffered serious financial losses and its population quickly slid into distress. From data entry and computer operations to plumbing and fitting, these courses were open to high school and college students. However, they were abruptly shut down in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The dual entanglements of floods followed by the pandemic exposed the town to the several challenges that come in the aftermath of natural, social and health disasters.

In this report, we revisit the city of Sangli with a direct and deeper purpose to understand the linkages between education and employment, and to document the shifting landscapes of education and skill development. While the immediate reality of the floods and the pandemic has exacerbated economic hardship, especially for the working poor, difficulties have been mounting over the past few decades as agriculture and dairy-based industries were systematically weakened. As we begin to foray into this report, perhaps a note of caution is warranted. Our empirical work is confined to the town of Sangli, which is a district bordering the states of Maharashtra and Karnataka. However, our interests in documenting social transitions and working on the linkages between education and livelihood have a broader scope. Several recent papers have drawn attention to the strategically important place that non-metropolitan centres have in urbanisation, migration and employment (RoyChowdhury & Upadhya, 2021). Smaller towns act as in-situ places for larger migration, that is, as pit stops for temporary employment. Smaller towns are also often the first places that young people choose to migrate to for education, before eventually moving to larger cities.

Literature in governance and policy has raised questions about effective structures for places that are neither rural nor urban (Denis et al., 2012). We use the term "small town" or "small city" rather loosely. Official categorisation of different urban settlements is often done using terms such as census towns, metropolis, peri-urban towns, industrial townships, districts and so on, each exhibiting specific characteristics. We agree with Naik and Randolph (2020) about recognising that an increasing number of places lie outside the binary of rural/urban.

> …the diverse range of places we call 'small cities' defy any easy categorization and assume many forms, including small towns, diffuse agglomerations of urbanizing villages, and extended 'rurban' corridors, among others. (p. 21)

While nebulous, the term "small cities" best captures a structural separation from erstwhile agrarian systems even as they carry some of the elements of agrarian settlements. The significant context here is what follows when the agro-based industries and cooperative factories close down. Remnants of such townships are common in several parts of the country including Maharashtra, where regenerating employment remains a major challenge. We turn to vocational and skill-based educational programmes and the experiences of students who access them. Representing two distinct tracks, vocational education and skill-based education have been at the centre of policy discourse in the past few years. While vocational education, also referred to as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), has a long and diverse institutional presence, such as in Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), polytechnics and senior secondary schools, skill-based programmes are more recent, often conducted as short-term courses and managed by several partnering institutions.

Conceptual Framing

This project is centred around vocational and skill-based programmes, and the students who access vocational education while working to earn a livelihood. In broader terms, our work seeks to understand the relationship between education and work.

In India's overall education system, vocational programmes do not occupy a mainstream position. In many ways, marginal institutions that often serve marginalised communities are at the centre of our project. Social and institutional transformation, justice, reflection and pedagogy are important considerations in our engagements.

We draw on a set of conceptual categories that we find useful in locating our work. The broad orientation of our work is towards the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) framework, which is historically attentive, seeks to go beyond the binary of structure–agency, and is invested in understanding the ways in which macro transformation interfaces with institutions, organisations and communities. As an approach, CPE has been effectively used by education researchers to analyse how the economic, social and cultural spheres are embedded in co-producing the contemporary discourses of educational reforms (Robertson & Dale, 2015; Verger et al., 2017). For instance, Verger et al. (2017) use CPE categories to identify six different pathways towards privatisation of education, and de Otero (2020) employs CPE to understand the role of different models of skill formation in the development of contemporary capitalism. As we turn our attention to vocational education and its recently revised adaptation in the form of skill-based programmes, the CPE framework points us towards possible exploration between vocational education and caste-based labour, the strict separation of vocational and academic tracks in India, and the politics of vocationalisation of school education and after-school initiatives.

Marginality and social/cultural reproduction are the two concepts that are relevant to our project. The reproduction of social categories, especially in formal educational spaces, has received sustained scholarly attention (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Giddens & Held, 1982; Nambissan, 2020; Tukdeo, 2019; Velaskar, 1990; Willis, 1977). The diverse literature on reproduction enables us to understand how educational institutions that predominantly admit students from disadvantaged backgrounds often struggle with basic upkeep. Such literature also examines how the social location of students seriously impacts the kind of education they can access, the type of safety net they have growing up and the kind of work they

will do. The conceptual repertoire associated with reproduction also opens for us several uncomfortable scenarios and questions: Why or how do students from marginalised communities identify with and aspire towards middle-class lifestyles? How do class and caste privilege and exclusion lead to differential educational access and outcome?

The World of Vocational and Skill-based Education

Skill training and its antecedent vocational education have always been part of the parallel, "other" stream, which despite many interventions continues to be in long-term stagnation. Encompassing a wide range of skills focused on physical labour, crafting, fitting, technical labour and newer demands by the service economy, vocational education is designed towards a quick entry into the labour market. Like many educational systems across the world, the distinction between academic and skill-based streams is clearly marked out in India in terms of the curriculum, duration, certification and profile of students who access these streams. Vocational and technical education has historically developed through the following five programmatic arrangements: Secondary vocational training, which runs parallel to general secondary education; polytechnic diploma courses; certificate courses in ITIs; certificate courses in apprenticeship; and courses run by advanced industrial training institutions (Biswas, 2008; Government of India, 2008). The shift from vocational to skill-based education is quite recent. As a response to the ever-increasing unemployment in sectors such as manufacturing post liberalisation, and complaints from other industries about the lack of useful training of Indian students, the skills discourse has focused on short-term courses organised through parastatal organisations such as the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) in conjunction with several skill councils. The Skill India initiative, together with a wide range of programmes and schemes, is geared towards the youth, India's demographic dividend, and has focused on technological, information-based and entrepreneurial models of training and work. Scholars of education in India have consistently drawn attention to the deeply iniquitous system and uneven structures. Access to education and academic success largely depends on class, caste, parental involvement, and social and cultural capital. In such a context, students from marginalised communities deploy numerous strategies to survive and thrive.

Questions, Scope and Method

As a grassroots organisation, Aakar Foundation[1] has been working in Maharashtra for over three decades on a range of issues. Anchoring several campaigns and civic work, Aakar has a considerable presence in Sangli. Its educational work includes a variety of initiatives: material assistance to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, career counselling and relief work. The foundation works closely with students who enter Class 8 to get them to complete their educational milestones until they find employment. While the focus of the foundation has been to provide material assistance to students whose families struggle to give them a good education, it is not done in a manner that is impersonal. Rather, the foundation conducts regular meetings with students and their parents, provides the students with a space that they can visit, talk with a counsellor, at times participate in treks and learn to volunteer.

During the pandemic, we heard many of our students tell us about the short-term work they had taken up or someone they knew had taken up. This sparked our interest in understanding more about how the

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[1] See: http://aakarfoundation.in/

experience of the pandemic was radically different for our students. With our engagement with TESF, we engaged in research for the first time, documenting and connecting what we had been seeing on the ground to the larger reality.

Despite their prevalence, "working students" have rarely received attention in scholarly literature. This project examines vocational programmes in the context of small towns and focuses on the experiences and narratives of students who work. Since vocational programmes are designed to prepare students for the labour market, these institutions can be important sites to understand the relationship between education and livelihoods. We find the term "transition" to be particularly useful as we map out the larger and temporal shifts in Sangli as a town, in educational institutions, and in the lives of the students we worked with. The following broad questions frame our project:

- What does it mean to be educated in a small, transitioning town?
- How do students from marginalised backgrounds occupy the worlds of schools and jobs?
- In what ways can the experiences of education or skill enhancement be connected to socially just pedagogy?

The overall orientation of this project is qualitative as we investigate social change in Sangli, its educational ecology in general and vocational institutions in particular. We examine meanings, structures and practices involved in imparting education and training. Multiple threads come together in this project: agrarian changes and a steady decline of the local cooperative industry in Maharashtra, diversification of schooling, and emergence of skill-based training programmes as a solution to unemployment.

Our methods of data collection are based on a systematic review of existing literature as well as fieldwork. We began by embarking on the task of learning about social and economic shifts in smaller cities in India over the past few decades, paying special attention to the south-western region and Sangli. Our reading of historical developments of the region is useful for us to locate the multiple processes that have taken place in the last few decades. People moving out of agriculture, limited public welfare projects and an expansion of educational institutions, including high-fee-charging private professional colleges, offer a glimpse of the major shifts that have occurred over the years.

Our second point of entry in this work was through interactions on the ground. Early on in our work, we took up a comprehensive canvassing of institutions in the city, followed by a consultative meeting in which teachers, administrators, government officials and members of civil society participated. We then selected three types of institutions for deeper engagements. These include an institution that offers vocational courses for Class 11 and 12 as part of the Minimum Competency and Vocational Courses (MCVC) , or what we call "Service College", an ITI and a privately managed institute specialising in several short-term skill-enhancing courses that we call "skill zone". The first consultative meeting was instrumental for us in zeroing in on these institutions. Representatives of the three institutions attended the meeting and allowed us inside their workplaces. Schools and colleges were beginning to open up after the hiatus resulting from the pandemic. Our fieldwork in these institutions included observations in classes land workplaces, and interviews with teachers and students. We selected 15 students from different institutions pursuing diverse courses to be part of our workshops, through which we had the chance to have longer, open-ended conversations. Our workshops had an element of art literacy, dialogues and activities that would foster a sense of collective work.

Table 1: Research process

Type of Data	Focus	Place in the Project
Reports in the public domain, contemporary history of Maharashtra	Transition out of agriculture; Impact → Livelihoods, migration, new forms of work	Background knowledge and conditions that are relevant for the project; Large-scale transformations and their impact on education
Canvassing, secondary data about vocational and skill-based institutions in the town	Number of institutions and range of programmes; Courses, fee structure, enrolment	Older institutions of vocational education as well as popular ones; Variety of institutions and programmes
Consultative meeting with stakeholders	Representatives from institutions (teachers, administrators), NGOs and government organisations, Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC)	Capturing a broader view of vocational/skill-based education; Diverse perspectives; Identifying institutions for field engagements
Fieldwork	Three sites, each with their unique focus; Observations, interviews, interactions	Actual working of institutions and everyday life; Conversations about teaching and learning
Workshop	Fifteen students who work and are currently enrolled in vocational programmes	Narratives, collective work and learning

Source: Compiled by the authors

Background research on contemporary Maharashtra as well as specific changes in the south-western region and its educational institutions allowed us to locate our work in a specific context (Baviskar, 1980; Mathew, 2021; Velaskar, 1990). As part of our canvassing efforts to make a comprehensive list of institutions that offer vocational or skill-based programmes, we came across different formal and informal ways in which skills are imparted and accessed. For instance, courses on beauty and wellness are offered in formal institutions as well as in smaller beauty parlours on the side. Notwithstanding the importance of these informal spaces that teach skills, we chose to focus on formal institutional contexts for the purpose of our project. It is instructive to turn to the District Skill Gap Study (DSGS) report (2013) by the NSDC, which records a total of 26 ITIs/Industrial Training Centres (ITCs) in Sangli district. Additionally,

there are institutions set up for specific trades such as agriculture, textiles and entrepreneurship. The report mentions that there is a growing demand in recent years for certificate courses in computer operations, C programming and Computer-Aided Designing.

Using the available information from the Directorate of Vocational Education and Training (DVET), local offices including the District Skill Development, Employment & Entrepreneurship Guidance Centre (DSDEEG), Udyog Bhavan, our contacts in the local vocational institutions and the websites, we created a typology of institutions involved in vocational/skill-based education.

Table 2: Types of vocational and skill-based education in Sangli

Type of Institution	Focus	Details
Industrial Training Institutions (ITI)	Most number of courses offered; One of the oldest institutions	Admission after completion of Class 8, 10 and 12; Provision of internship certification is instrumental in securing government employment
Polytechnic	Courses in vocational and allied technical branches	Flexible options for admissions (after Class 10 and 12); Courses with duration of 1–3 years
Minimum Competence Vocational Courses (MCVC)	Part of the scheme of Government of Maharashtra; Select tracks offered	Courses in vocational education offered as part of Higher Secondary Certificate
Agriculture-related institutions	A wide range of courses; Part of the Department of Agricultural Research & Education (DARE)	Short- and long-term courses (gardening, land surveying etc.); Certification useful in securing government employment
Engineering diploma	Offered by engineering colleges; Focused on technical curricula	Possibility of moving into engineering
Vocationalisation programmes	Courses offered by high schools as formal and auxiliary mechanisms	Limited tracks; Offered in select schools; Challenges of infrastructure determine the kinds of courses that can be offered

Computer-related courses	Offered widely and are popular	Flexible courses in terms of duration; Flexibility regarding prior knowledge
Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)	Part of arrangements between different institutions	Short-term courses largely offered by private institutions
Newer sectors	Specific technologies	Less number of institutions
Informal instruction	Through non-formal apprenticeship	No formal certification involved; Experience is sought to start one's own unit

Source: Compiled by the authors

Consultative meeting

The initial consultative meeting had a wider representation by institutions (public, private or managed by grant-in-aid), NGOs and government officials, among others. This meeting revealed to us the diversity of skill-based courses that have been running in the region, such as land surveying and gardening, which were popular in the rural parts of the district, to others such as automobile technology and nursing that were more in demand in Sangli city.

Fieldwork

We began our fieldwork by doing a survey of the institution in question. We also observed classes and workshops, organised interactions with students and teachers, and chose a few respondents for longer interviews. We experienced uneven access in our work. For instance, the service school encouraged us to visit and talk to their students, whereas the time given by the training school for observations was limited, though we were able to interview the students. At the skill zone, which is a privately-run institution that offers short-term courses, we were offered minimum time to interact with teachers and we could not observe classes. While the unevenness in time spent in each institution was a factor, it did not significantly affect our work as we were able to get information through questionnaires and interviews outside the institution premises. All the interviews were voluntary and the responses have been anonymised. The fieldwork allowed us to witness the actual workings of vocational and skill-based courses in these institutions.

Workshops

We organised a series of workshops for 15 students from various vocational and skill-based institutions in the city. The students were engaged in work and education. This was a space to have extended interactions with students and work with them on a small project involving art, writing and discussion. The workshops resulted in artwork and short films by the students and were displayed by Aakar Foundation.

Respecting the voice of our respondents

In our interviews with students, teachers and other staff, we had a truthful recording of their opinions

that ranged from issues of immediate relevance to larger structural factors. We kept our questions open-ended in the beginning and then oriented them to more specific points. In our workshops with students, we were extremely conscious of making sure that their voice was not "interpreted" by us. We structured the workshops in a way that would lead to honest dialogue with the students. Following hooks (2010), "the most exciting aspect of critical thinking … is that it calls for initiatives from everyone, actively inviting all students to think passionately and to share ideas in a passionate, open manner" (p. 11). We also take seriously Paulo Freire's emphasis on dialogue. Freire (1993) reminds us that questioning and reflections are important aspects of critical, socially just pedagogy where students exercise their voice and perspectives.

Process of data analysis

The collected data was organised in the following categories: (a) history and structure of vocational education; (b) social transformation in Maharashtra; (c) school observations; (d) interactions; (e) interviews; and (f) workshop activities. A broad thematic analysis was conducted of the interactions and observations.

EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND SMALL CITIES

For a long time, researchers of education documented institutional presence in diverse regions to understand educational access and quality. Spatial/economic contexts and educational access are co-relational in most cases. That is, educational access is comparatively difficult in tribal, rural and economically impoverished areas. While primary education is available in various parts of the country, the access to higher education and specialised tracks has mainly been limited to cities. Historically, universities were founded in urban areas and there continues to be a wide chasm between rural and urban regions in terms of educational possibilities. Among many purposes, education also develops students' capabilities so that they can be employed. The connection between education and employment is far from simple; however, it is useful to note that completion of high school is a prerequisite for a vast number of jobs. TVET, engineering and medical education, and skill-based education are expected to easily lend themselves to employment opportunities. Major directions in governance and policy over the past few years in numerous countries have tended to rely on investing in human capital to promote economic expansion (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007; Mathur, 1990). There have been attempts to link work and education more directly, especially in the developing world, as the education sector has begun to expand in many countries. The policies of development also prioritise close connections between learning and work, resulting in two scenarios: (a) the new labour market demands higher levels of education for higher salaries; and (b) the emergence of a "skills hierarchy" leading to better-paying jobs for those with specific skill sets. These developments have led to efforts in increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and institutionalisation of different types of skills in many developing countries. In India, policy discussions have regularly referred to the benefits of demographic dividend, that is, the sizeable young population in the country. While the TVET sector has gradually expanded over the past seven decades in India, it has witnessed significant changes in the last twenty years as skilling became an important arena of intervention. The reforms in skill-based education came in the wake of long-time criticism of Indian education for being too academic and producing "unemployable graduates".

From Vocational to Skill-based Education: Expansion, Structures and Interventions

Since the early twentieth century, as mass education began shaping up in India, the role of work was raised, especially in discussions on the structure and goals of the education system. The Gandhian conception of Nai Talim (basic education) sought to indigenise education by including productive skills, crafts and manual labour in the school curriculum. The integration of work, however, did not become part of the vision of educational expansion in India and two separate streams, each focusing on education and training, or academic and vocational, ensued. As part of the expansion, the Mudaliar Commission (1952–53) called for a vocational stream after eight years of schooling, whereas the Kothari Commission (1964–66) recommended 10 years of common schooling for all before students opted for vocational or other streams. Vocational education also received separate administrative authority in terms of the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), which oversees planning development and quality assurance. The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) is a nodal agency for vocational education, with the Directorate General of Training (DGT) administering central institutions.

In terms of including vocational courses in school curricula, vocational education programmes started in 1976 at the senior secondary level. However, they were discontinued in 1979. In the same year, a scheme of opening up community polytechnic institutions in rural areas was introduced with the hope to create technicians in small towns and rural areas. Under this scheme, the vocational institutions expanded a great deal and saw infrastructural improvements. In 1986, following the National Policy on Education (NPE), a centrally sponsored scheme called Vocationalisation of Secondary Education was initiated in 1988. The scheme was revised under the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) in 2013. In the 2000s, the discourse of skill development made its way to policy circuits and the 11th Five-Year Plan (2007–12) raised the issue of skill development and proposed greater participation by private actors. In this context, the NSDC was set up in 2008 and the first National Skill Development Policy was introduced in 2009, setting an ambitious target of training 500 million youth by 2022. After forming the National Skill Development Agency (NSDA) in 2013, the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) was adopted. The MSDE launched the Skill India Mission in 2015 along with its flagship scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY).

Presently, vocational education courses are provided under two major schemes: Craftsman Training Scheme (CTS) and Apprenticeship Training. The minimum educational requirement for admitting a student to vocational education is completion of Class 8. CTS is operative in ITIs that offer courses for a duration of 6–14 months. The exhaustive list covered by ITIs includes 126 courses, of which 73 are technical and 48 are non-technical. Despite an increase in the number of courses on offer in the last few years, the number of people trained in the various trades is well below the demand. Apprenticeship Training is offered in institutions as well as at workplaces, following a dual training approach. The main purpose of this scheme was to involve employers to train students in workplace settings so that a range of skill sets can be covered. The training period is usually a year and students also receive a monthly stipend.

Table 3: Vocational courses in different institutional contexts

Type of Institution	Level	Nodal Ministry	Number of Institutions
Schools	Secondary and Senior Secondary	Ministry of Education	2,52,176
Industrial Training Institutions	National Trade Certificate	Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship	14,312
Polytechnics	Diploma	Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship	3,867

Source: UNESCO, 2018

While vocational education comprises long-term and more structured programmes, several short-term programmes are offered under "skilling" that run for a few weeks to months, focusing on job-specific training such as carpentry, beauty and wellness, plumbing, and so on. These trades are also offered as part of vocational education, though for a longer duration. Research on TVET and skill-based education programmes has brought to attention certain persistent and systemic issues. These include the quality of the vocational/skill-based programmes, including the quality of teachers, public funding to these institutions, recognition of the TVET/skill-based programmes by industries and the impact of the informal economy on the functioning of these programmes (Maitra & Maitra, 2019; Pilz, 2016; Rao et al., 2014). It is also important to understand the complicated connections between caste-based occupations, informality, stigma and educational aspirations in thinking about the responses to TVET.

For our project, we wanted to historicise and contextualise the landscape of vocational and skill-based education. Such an exercise would be important for it would allow us to understand that what we see on the ground is in fact shaped by larger factors. For instance, when one of the largest sugar cooperatives that started in Sangli district was downsized in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it led to an increase in economic and social vulnerability. We met many students whose family members lost their livelihoods after the factory was downsized. The changing economic conditions have underwritten the grammar of several struggling families whose children had to take up jobs at a young age. We also wanted to be attentive to the contemporary social history of Maharashtra since our project hoped to understand the context of vocational/skill-based education not in isolation, but as part of a larger transformation. In particular, we consider the following trends relevant. First, the smaller cities and towns in south-western Maharashtra benefitted immensely from the spread of cooperative industries, especially in sugar, dairy and cotton. The growth of cooperatives was coterminous with the expansion of rural industries, banking, education and allied industries that were crucial to the development of smaller cities and also became sources of livelihood. Significant change took place in the late 1980s with an overall direction towards economic liberalisation (Nigam & Menon, 2007) affecting numerous cooperative factories in Maharashtra (Godbole, 2000).

THE MANY-LAYERED UNIVERSE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: VOICES FROM THE FIELD

We present below the voices, information and perspectives we encountered during our interactions on ground.

As stated earlier, we began by a broad canvassing of institutions in Sangli that offer vocational and skill-based programmes. Developing this list was our first foray into understanding the breadth of such programmes in the city. The Directorate of Vocational and Training Institutions, Maharashtra State[2] and the Directorate of Technical Education, Maharashtra State[3] were two starting points as they provide a list of government-run institutions classified by trade and type of curriculum. Other sources, such as the Maharashtra State Board of Vocational Education Examination (MSBEE), provide information of junior colleges in the state that offer vocational courses as part of Class 11 and 12 programmes, among other data on institutions that run on grant-in-aid and private bases. The Udyog Bhavan, the district industries centre in Sangli, was another source we approached. However, they had been focusing on post-COVID-19 health recovery tasks and could not direct us beyond the data published by the directorate. Using online sources and through personal connections, we cross-checked the institutions and arrived at a list of 40 working institutions in Sangli city that have been active for more than five years, have students enrolled in multiple subjects/tracks, and have an actual physical space and infrastructure where classes happen. In this exercise, we came to know that there are some institutions that have been approved but have not yet started classes, and some skill-based initiatives that started as part of PMKVY but had not panned out.

In our first consultative meeting, we had 24 participants, including teachers from various vocational and skill-based institutions, representatives of local civic organisations and a member of the local council. The following were the leading questions for the meeting:
- What is the overall scenario of vocational education in the city? What subjects/tracks are working well?
- What are the conditions in which the tracks are taught?
- What new tracks need to be introduced, if any?
- How effective are the recent initiatives of short-term skill courses?
- What are the main challenges faced by vocational and skill training institutions?

Some useful points emerged from this conversation. The trajectory of vocational education does not unfold in the narrow form that we have come to understand it. The Marathi term *vyavasayabhimukh* (oriented towards work) captures the essence of these programmes. They are not simply focused on a particular trade, but are geared towards work and becoming a working professional. The history of vocational institutions in the city dates to the late nineteenth century, when the first technical and agricultural school was established in Sangli in 1888 as part of the missionary establishment, focusing on craftsmanship, agriculture technology and driving. After Independence, new schools and training institutions were founded. The city of Sangli now has several excellent schools and colleges, including engineering and medical colleges of high repute. In comparison, the vocational institutions have been lagging. Currently,

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[2] See https://pune.dvet.gov.in/sangli-institutes

[3] See https://poly23.dtemaharashtra.gov.in/diploma23/index.php/hp_controller/instcourses

there are seven types of institutions: industrial training schools, polytechnics, institutions offering MCVC courses, agriculture-related schools, nursing and healthcare schools, information technology (IT) embedded vocational centres and newly established skill-based programmes. We need to understand that with this wide spectrum of programmes, it is not possible to make broad generalisations without paying sufficient attention to their contexts. To start with, the government-run ITIs and MCVC courses are more in demand and receive higher enrolment. The agriculture-related courses, providing training on land surveying, agro-technology and gardening, have not attracted enough students. There are two interrelated observations in this regard. First, there has been a steady growth of enrolment in academic programmes in the country, but similar popularisation of education and specific branches has completely escaped vocational programmes. Second, there has not been enough information about these courses in the popular sphere.

Further, access to vocational courses is dependent on two factors. The first factor—which is something we repeatedly encountered in the field—is *manasikta* (outlook). A teacher of MCVC courses said,

> *"There is a lot of prestige to white collar jobs and the manasikta is to avoid manual labour if possible. Nobody wants to dirty their hands. If physical and manual labour were to be valued in our society, the vocational courses would have become something to aspire for."*

While the point about the outlook towards manual labour indicates that it can be changed or corrected, we revisited it during the course of the meeting to discuss other, deeper issues that impact the state in which we see vocational education today—dignity of labour and the practice of caste-based occupations.

The second point about access to vocational education was brought up in connection to the scope for secure, long-term employment after completion of the course. In the 1970s and 1980s, vocational and polytechnic graduates were absorbed by public sector units, cooperatives and manufacturing industries. However, with the downsizing of public sector units and struggling cooperatives and manufacturing industry, the primary sources of employment for students of vocational education are mainly the military and police services. A teacher working at an ITI said,

> *"We are competing with colleges that have placements! The students know that engineering colleges have campus interviews that can lead to jobs. We don't have a system like that. Our students [at the ITI] do an internship and it is very useful, but a possible guarantee of employment after the course completion is not there."*

Many participants also pointed out the abysmal numbers of women students in vocational education. Courses such as MCVC open up possibilities to enter academic tracks after doing vocational education in Class 11 and 12. Despite this flexibility, we do not see women students enrolling in these courses. The discussion came back to *manasikta* of work and how only certain kinds of work are perceived to be appropriate for women. In this regard, the discussion veered towards parallels in engineering. Fifty years ago, women students did not seek admission in engineering. Now, the trends have changed and their enrolment in such courses has gone up. It was also pointed out that there is a need to make vocational education appealing to everyone, including women students. Finally, in terms of newly formed skill-based

initiatives, the participants pointed out that in small towns such as Sangli, the skill-based centres have made a mark in the domains of offering courses in Information Technology in general and Computer Operations in particular, something the students felt aided their chances of finding a job. The response for courses offered by the Maharashtra State-Certificate in Information Technology (MS-CIT) also indicates the value of IT and IT-allied courses in smaller towns.

The newly set up private institutions offer short-term courses with a promise of placement, but the fee structure of these institutions places constraints on students from economically poor backgrounds.

Our interactions with teachers also brought out some of the points that we heard during the consultative meeting. We conducted fieldwork in different sites: a junior college that offers MCVC courses, an ITI that provides a wide variety of vocational and technical courses, and a skill training centre that primarily offers computer-related courses.

The teachers in vocational institutions felt that they did not get academically bright students, who turn towards the vocational track as their last resort. Thinking of their role as teachers who had to work with students who had struggled academically, our respondents expressed both serious constraints as well as possibilities. The constraints were largely related to the way they understood their students to have picked up "allied traits" such as lack of motivation, inability to concentrate and a non-supportive home environment. However, this perception shifted and soon made way for teachers to proudly showcase their students' skills by the end of the course. One teacher told us,

> *"Some of our students are better at the job than studying engineering. Failure in school makes them diffident and disinterested, but they really do better once they start working with machines, opening and assembling several parts."*

Stories of eventual success of their students who went on to become sought-after building contractors, officials with the Public Works Department (PWD) and enterprising professionals were important details in our collective thinking about possible options of employment after completing vocational education.

For their own work as teachers of vocational training, many felt that there was no opportunity for professional growth. Unlike other fields, there are no regular conferences or professional development courses where they can update their knowledge. Since the dwindling enrolment in several tracks/ subjects, teachers are increasingly expected to help boost enrolment and recruit more students. Several teachers highlighted the recent trend of closure of certain tracks owing to low enrolment and growing contractualisation of teaching in vocational education. While the training institute teachers get paid well, their counterparts in private institutions are paid poorly.

In our first few interactions at the Service College, we had a free-flowing conversation with students from all branches. The college administration had set aside time for us to interact with the students. After introducing ourselves and giving some general information about our project, we gave the students a small task. They were asked to write the details of the track they were studying in, why they had chosen that track and what they would like to do in the future after completing their education. As can be seen in the extracts reproduced below, their family's *aarthik paristhiti* (economic condition) was central to their

decision to choose a particular trade and it also figured prominently in their plans for the future.
M, a student of Class 11 studying construction technology, wrote,

> *"I chose this programme because the economic situation of our family has been difficult. Once I finish my course, I want to apply for recruitment in the police department. If I do not get selected then I will open a shop."*

J, studying in Class 12, wrote,

> *"I chose automobile trade because I had an interest in vehicles right from my childhood. My father drives an autorickshaw. I thought of enrolling in this programme so that I can be of help to my father. My parents want me to find a job in a nice company. We live in a small, rented house. I want to see my family happy and settled soon."*

A, another student in Class 12, wrote

> *"I am studying in the automobile programme. I want to make a name for myself and become independent. My family has endured economic hardship and we live in a small house. I want to become a successful man."*

There were also some students who wrote about their unrealised dreams and plans that did not sit right with what is expected of them. C, a student of Class 11, wrote,

> *"I wanted to become a district collector when I was a child. Our economic situation is hard, and I don't know English well. I came to the vocational programme so that I can pass and have an HSC certificate. My dream [of becoming an IAS officer] won't come true."*

Z, studying in Class 12, wrote,

> *"I am a student of the construction technology trade. I don't like this. I took this because my family said I need to study up to 12th. I want to become a youtuber/blogger."*

Similarly, O, another student of Class 11, wrote,

> *"I studied Mechanical Technology before in the industrial training school but couldn't find work during the lockdown, so I have now joined the automobile technology branch here … I watched the film 'Ford vs Ferrari' and thought it'd be so great to make a sports car! Once I am done with my training here, I will try and get admission in the engineering diploma course, but my ultimate goal in life is to design a sports car."*

These extracts, recorded and reproduced as is, allow us a deeper view into the world of vocational education that is built and inhabited by a diverse community. The narratives take us towards the daily life of the working students, but they also highlight the larger issues that affect the everyday. Social class and caste locations are crucial in determining who goes to which school; and once in the institution, the shadow of social disadvantage continues to follow. It is interesting to see how the dreams and discussions of the future form an important part of students' educational experience. Even as economic hardships frame their entry into the vocational stream and oftentimes direct the route of work they must take after they finish, the students' dreams and desires for their future are varied and include elements of adventure, fun, a departure from their current economic circumstances and a sense of duty towards their families.

LIVES ENVELOPED IN WORK: NARRATIVES OF WORKING STUDENTS

The year 2020–21 saw the longest interruption in schools around the world due to COVID-19. The lockdown was first called in India in March 2020, and the health disaster soon escalated to a social disaster. Large-scale migration, crisis of livelihood and inadequate access to healthcare were reported in India during the pandemic.

In our conversations with the students, the "Covid year" became an opening reference in some cases, or a temporal reference in others. Contrary to the middle-class student experience of online education, home-boundedness and extra time with family, most students we spoke with had spent the year working. They worked on farms, in homes, shops and garages to make ends meet. As we tried to understand their experience of work during the pandemic, two recurring details emerged: several students began doing some form of paid/unpaid work along with a family member who was working full-time; and work became normalised for the period of the pandemic. We sat down with Harsha, who first started "going along" with his grandfather to repair motorised water pumps when the city was brought to a standstill after the 2019 floods. Initially, he only went along to carry the tool bag for his grandfather. *"There was a lot of work since the motors were damaged everywhere. We moved to all areas of the city and went to adjoining towns and villages to repair"*. Harsha learnt the techniques of repairs as he assisted his grandfather. *"Some months later, during corona time when it was difficult to find people to do small-time household repairing, we again went everywhere and got many jobs"*. Harsha is now enrolled in a course on electrical technology and wiring. After classes get over, he spends most evenings taking up small repair jobs.

Figure 1: Service College premises: Discarded tools due to floods

Source: The authors' fieldwork repository

We asked students about how they went about their day and heard about how work and education have kept them occupied. Below are snippets from these conversations.

We met J. He is in Class 11 and has been working as a mechanic. His father is a driver and his mother is a domestic worker.

> J: *"I wake up at 6, get ready and come to college by 7:30. After I am done with my classes at 11:30, I head to my cousin's shop where we repair punctured tyres. I work there until 8:30, sometimes later than that. We say there is no closing time for our shop as there are always vehicles that need repairs."*
>
> Interviewer (I): *"Okay, but still, when do you close usually?"*
>
> J: *"Sometimes the shop closes at 10:30 or 11 at night. If there is an emergency, we take up repair work after midnight as well."*
>
> I: *"How long have you been working in the shop?"*
>
> J: *"For two years. During COVID and lockdown time, I came in early to work and learnt as much as I could."*
>
> I: *"What kind of repairs can you make now?"*
>
> J: *"I can fix punctures in any vehicle."*
>
> I: *"Any? Any vehicle?"*
>
> J: *"Yes! Scooter, car, bike, bicycle, truck, JCB. All."*
>
> I: *"What kind of work do you have to do at the shop?"*
>
> J: *"Opening up the tyre, fixing the cut, using changing machine etc."*
>
> I: *"Okay, what have you learnt in your classes here?"*
>
> J: *"Fixing the 'job'."*
>
> I: *"Job?"*
>
> J: *"Yes, it is a term. It is a square-shaped nut that has crooked edges that we must work and make smooth. We also learn to do the print-job, using different types of spanners correctly. We are taught using a projector here, so it is very clear."*
>
> I: *"Okay."*
>
> J: *"They also show simulated models of car engines, which is something really nice."*
>
> I: *"What are your plans after you finish your 12th class?"*
>
> J: *"I want to open a shop that sells spare parts for different vehicles. This is something I can start soon. After some years, I want to open my own garage. It will take 5–7 lakhs to buy new machines and open a big garage."*

H is studying machine mechanics and tools at the ITI. He comes from a large family that migrated to Sangli a decade ago. He spends his mornings helping his father load up heavy cargo onto trucks.

> Interviewer (I): *"Tell me about your day."*
>
> H: *"I work with my father in the morning and come to college in the afternoon since my classes start at 1 pm."*
>
> I: *"What work do your parents do?"*
>
> H: *"My mother works two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening sweeping and cooking for some families. My father loads heavy stuff onto the lorries in the market yard."*
>
> I: *"And you join him in the morning?"*
>
> H: *"Yes. He leaves before the break of dawn. I work from 6-6:30 am to 12 pm."*
>
> I: *"What do you do specifically?"*

H: *"There are large sacks of turmeric, jaggery and grains that we load onto the trucks that usually line up in the yard. It takes many hours to load a truck. These trucks usually carry the stuff outside the state."*

I: *"Did you work in the market yard during the Covid year?"*

H: *"Yes. Most days I worked."*

I: *"How much do they pay the workers?"*

H: *"It is not fixed. Depends on how much time we spend and depends on the season."*

I: *"What do you mean?"*

H: *"Now this is the season to transport the turmeric to larger markets, so it must be picked up from here fast. So, I get Rs. 1,000 for a day's work these days."*

I: *"How long have you been doing this work?"*

H: *"Since I was in 10th class. I won't continue this for long because I don't like it. We need the money."*

I: *"Yes… once you finish your course from the ITI."*

H: *"Yes, I have told a friend and after I complete the course, I will get a part-time job."*

During the pandemic, the term "interruption" became significant as it pointed out the sudden and long halt in the otherwise regular schooling life. The narratives of "working students" bring out a new dimension to the term "interruption" as it is not limited only to the pandemic. On an everyday basis, the students' lives are partitioned into work and school. It is also important to note here the ways in which the stories and voices of working students become invisible in our textbooks, policy documents, research and even classrooms.

Figure 2: Workshop at the Industrial Training Institute (ITI)

Source: The authors' fieldwork repository

DIALOGUE AS A STEPPING STONE FOR SOCIALLY JUST PEDAGOGY

On a Saturday afternoon in August 2022, we began our first workshop held in a large community hall in Sangli with lots of open space around, an elevated platform at one end, and a cabinet with art and craft materials on the other. The hall was regularly accessed as it would host talks and performances. The *Samvad Shibir* or Interactive Workshop was held on weekends with 15 students. We had met them before the workshop in our visits to their college and some of them were associated with Aakar Foundation. All of them had enrolled in various vocational/skill-based courses in the city, held jobs or had worked intermittently.

As social science research is committed to understanding the problem in all its complexity without rushing for premature fixes and solutions, we have spent many agonising hours wondering about the action- and intervention-based steps in this project. Are we prescribing interventions too soon? While the thinking of interventions came together from the ground up, in discussions with communities closely connected to vocational education, we took our time before coming up with concrete suggestions. Since Aakar Foundation has had a presence on the ground, we were able to have conversations with people and organisations active in wide-ranging domains, propelling us to think about short-term as well as long-term initiatives. We also began thinking of these steps as something Aakar can take up and expand its reach.

To start, the series of workshops was designed to introduce students to the elements of expression and work with them to see if the skill-based curricula can include other skills that are equally important but missing from the current structures. Without having a blueprint at hand, we designed the workshop with the explicit intention of creating space for conversations, play, stories and other expressions. Loosely structured, we wanted to hear the students out and work with them and the teachers towards imagining workable interventions.

As our field visits and consultative meetings indicated, there are three major issues that vocational institutions are grappling with: (a) infrastructural and equipment-related constraints; (b) inadequate support for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds; and (c) inadequate support to students after they complete their education.

In addition to the Aakar team, three teachers and a documentary film-maker participated in the workshops, helping us with some sessions, thinking with us and occasionally participating in the activities.

First Steps: Getting to Know Each Other

The workshops started in the morning at 11:30 am and went on till 4:30 pm, with a lunch break and two tea breaks over which the conversations continued. When we started, the students assembled neatly as if they were in school. Since they went to different schools and colleges, they did not know each other. Many of them had to make adjustments at work and take the time out to attend something that was not directly linked to their job or education. Most students had not participated in a workshop, nor did they have prior experience of doing group work. They had, however, interacted with members of Aakar

Foundation and the team researching this project. We began the session by breaking the uncomfortable silence and hesitation that was palpable as everyone arrived. To start, we all sat around making a large circle and introduced ourselves by telling our names. As an icebreaker, we proposed two exercises. Sitting together, we asked everyone to recall the name and information of the person next to them. Wrong names and laughter helped ease up the participants. We then asked everyone to do one thing with their body. It could be anything! After a short collective pause, the large circle became both the stage and cheering audience for demonstrations of cartwheels, dances and dramatic acts, among others.

The focus of the first workshop was to create a safe space for everyone and make sure that the students talked—to us and to each other. We could understand the initial unnerving sense of being in an unfamiliar place, at a gathering without an explicit agenda. As we welcomed everyone, we discussed the purpose and rough format of the four workshops by highlighting the following:

- We wanted to hear them and their experiences of education as well as work.
- We wanted to know what additional skills might be useful for them.
- We wanted to understand where they see themselves in the future.
- We were interested in what they had to say about the city, politics, films and sports.

Following the rather open-ended and free-flowing interaction in the first session that created a sense of ease and fun among the students, we proceeded with structuring the subsequent sessions by focusing on the topics that appeared in the open-ended conversations. These included: (a) floods in Sangli; (b) COVID-19 and its aftermath; (c) learning and work; (d) gender, education and work.

We asked the students to talk, draw and perform on any of these topics after they discussed one topic in detail in a group. We told them to bring in their work to the second workshop. Some students wrote, others drew, enacted and often times came back to the themes.

Figure 3: Group discussion

Source: The authors' repository

Floods: Uncertainty, Unpreparedness and Loss

The 2019 floods occupied our conversations, and in one way or another came up in discussions. As memories of the flood resurfaced, the students talked about being taken by surprise as the water rose unexpectedly. They described where they were when the water had surged. The spatially significant points changed for the city. *"The part that was once populated because it was closer to the river became dangerous"*, said A, who had been living in a small slum near the river and was among those who were rehabilitated. The floods led to temporary (and in some cases, long-term) displacement for many families. As houses and neighbourhoods were marooned and people waited in shelters for normalcy to return, the sense of loss prevailed. *"It was eerie to walk around the neighbourhood after the water started to recede. It had left muck, dead animals and a foul smell"*. A went on to describe how he kept going back to the neighbourhood as soon as the water began to recede. Families lost out on income as they moved to drier areas. Memories of the college library, the tools and machinery used in classes immersed in water were too powerful to gauge the impact and consequences for students and teachers.

COVID-19 further underscored the sense of loss. While school interruption led to these students working and learning, the format of online classes placed the burden of access on their shoulders. *"We approached some organisations like Aakar to help us with tablets and/or money for enabling mobile data in our phones"* said Z, as she narrated the conditions in which education resumed.

Out of this discussion emerged a small group of students who decided to make a short film documenting the voices of people in their neighbourhoods who experienced the floods and the pandemic. In many ways, this collective desire to take up action-oriented work that involved students and documented the struggles of their own communities was an excellent outcome of our long interactions.

Figure 4: My workspace
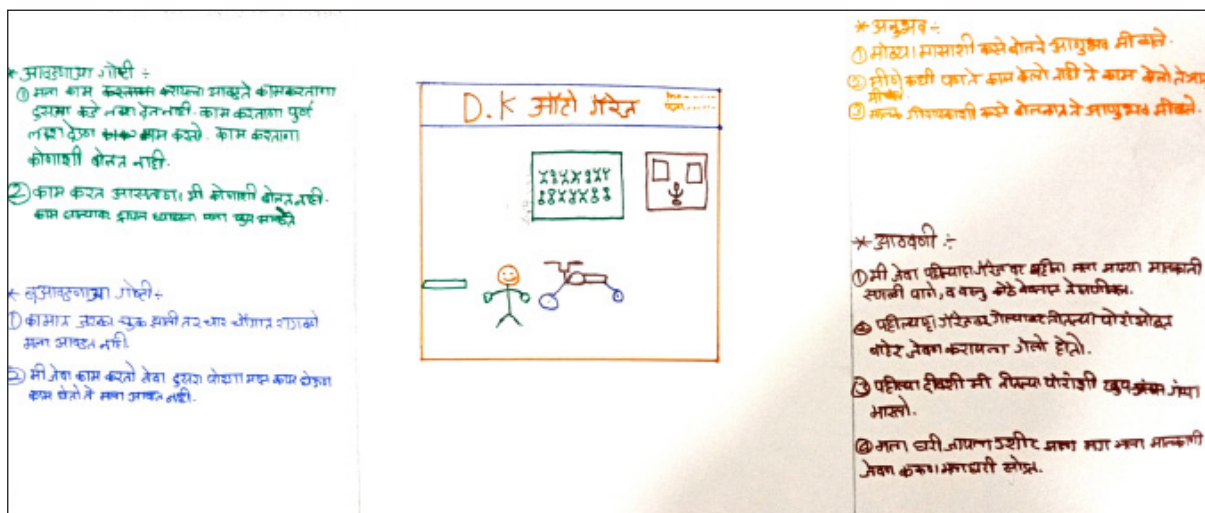
Source: The authors' repository

Workshop 3: My Work Matters

As a structured dialogical session, we focused on "self-introduction" at various stages in our workshops. Understood to be a rather preliminary and innocuous part for students coming from middle-class backgrounds, talking about oneself did not come easily to the working-class students who came to our

workshops. Like their middle-class counterparts, they also did not see much use in engaging in this ritualistic exercise. *"Why do we need to prepare and talk about ourselves? Who are we going to tell this?"* The questions ranged from mild hesitation to overt resistance to participating in the activity of learning to introduce oneself.

Adolescent shyness coupled with an unconvinced sense resulted in a rather lukewarm response when we first broached this topic. Nonetheless, we continued to bring this up. Our collective work involved breaking down the uninteresting task of talking about oneself into smaller segments of personal details, educational and work-related information, and other interests or hobbies. Given that many of them were browsing short-form content and vlogs on their phones, the idea of developing their introduction soon came to excite them. Students worked in small groups, drafting their sentences, checking the details of their presentations and rehearsing. *"I want to start my own YouTube channel some day and this will help"*, said JN, who was studying in the ITI and wanted to open a garage. His introduction is reproduced below:

> *"Namaskar, I am JN. I am studying automobile technology at ITI. I also work at a garage in my free time and I can now repair two-wheeler and four-wheeler vehicles, and offer timely servicing and maintenance of cars. In future, I want to start my own garage."*

While the introduction had minimum details, some students included information about their families, hobbies and so on. In a short time, the usually dreaded question of "introduction" now had interesting responses from students who took turns to listen to each other, give feedback and improve their drafts. The two topical conversations described above include in themselves different possibilities. While the first conversation delved into the everyday, the second conversation began like a school assignment but went on to mean something tangible for the students. In our conversations with teachers of vocational education, we heard the need to impart "soft skills" to the students. The instance of preparing a self-introduction could very well be seen as this. We would, however, like to draw attention to the process. In their instrumentalist forms, soft skills may not be relatable to students. If they are part of a collective process that respects their agency, the weight of externalising the requirements and goals reduces.

As part of their collective work during the workshops, the students learnt to make short videos using their mobile phones. These videos covered topics as diverse as operating a lathe machine, water pollution, documenting the work of a medical lab technician and the earthing process, to name a few. These videos are roughly 1–2 minutes long and the topic is presented through a set of images, explanations and text. We had a documentary film-maker and media studies teacher explain the process of making a short film: deciding a topic, outlining, collecting material, writing down all the aspects and then actually shooting it. After a short session, the students worked in groups, decided on the topic and wrote a script that would capture all of their ideas. Making the videos was a fun way in which students from different schools got together, worked with their mobile phones and produced something.

Figure 5: Stories of floods

Source: The authors' repository

POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS

There needs to be a recognition of working students in all streams, but especially in vocational education, since they are prevalent in vocational streams. The current curriculum of vocational and skill-based education is extremely instrumental. It is important to change the structure and bring in more humanistic, liberal and artistic elements into vocational education.

Can we imagine an education system that acknowledges the depth of social inequality that exists in our society? Educational inequality begins at an early age, much before the gates of schooling open for some and close for others. It begins when the poor parents struggle to provide basic nutrition and health to their children while new types of preschools glitter up in wealthy neighbourhoods, offering early introduction to schooling. In their most obvious as well as subtle forms, unequal experiences of education persist for the most. It is in this context that socially just pedagogy needs to be thought. We present below a much-needed rethinking of vocational education, keeping social justice as an essential focus.

To start, the streams of vocational and skill-based education need to expand their scope. In addition to technical and vocational learning, these programmes need to actively engage with humanistic ideas and skills. At the fundamental level, the strict separation between manual and cerebral skills needs to be

dismantled. At present, some vocational courses include classes in language and basic financial literacy. It is important to reimagine what is needed for a successful student to complete a vocational degree. Rather than thinking of their futures in fragmented forms, vocational and skill-based education needs to contribute towards their students' lives as workers, technicians and craftspeople.

In terms of structural revision, liberal and humanistic components such as the inclusion of art, stories and video literacy should be part of the curriculum without being tied exclusively to examinations. Such learning can be introduced to every student, along the lines of the current provision of internships, wherein the time spent on learning skills is understood to enhance the educational experience of the student. The courses can be developed within the institutions or by outside agencies. The inclusion of arts, fiction and popular films as primary sources are crucial to impart humanistic education.

A socially just pedagogy would begin by identifying values such as dignity of labour, meaningful empowerment, democracy and students' agency in developing the contents for vocational and skill-based education. Instead of omitting questions of caste, class and gender from vocational programmes, the pedagogy would bring them to the fore and have students (and teachers) gain collective consciousness about the troubled relationship between work, education and caste.

Socially just pedagogy needs to be built on the stories of struggle and resilience of socially disadvantaged communities around the world. It is possible to combine the technical know-how with the history of work in textbooks so that a critical outlook is enmeshed in the learning. Finally, socially just pedagogy is not just for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It needs to actively engage with students from dominant backgrounds about their privilege.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We began this project with the purpose of understanding vocational and skill-based educational programmes in a small city such as Sangli. In our work as a grassroots organisation, we observed that securing livelihoods has been crucial to numerous families in the city as they work to sustain themselves and support their children's education. This project allowed us to think of deeper connections between education and work. If the role of education is to enable people to work so that they can overcome their challenging life circumstances, then is the current system performing its role? What steps must be taken in order for education to be genuinely transformative? Our initial question of what it means to be educated in a small, transitioning town led us to examine the educational ecosystem of Sangli, where numerous public and private institutions have been developed to help facilitate students' learning and skills. The institutions that are more directly involved in helping students navigate the spheres of work are vocational institutions and skill-based centres. In our interactions, we observed how intertwined the worlds of work and education are for students, and how the time they spend in educational institutions is crucial for them to learn and grow.

Given that there has been urgent attention in recent years towards initiatives such as "lifelong learning", "entrepreneurial skills" and "innovative skills" that call for education to adopt a clearer skill-based

orientation, we wanted to turn to the institutions that offer skill-based curricula. The following points best capture our findings from this work.

Inadequacies of Different Kinds

During our visit, we found that the 2019 floods had severely affected many schools and colleges. In one vocational institution, the entire machinery was washed out and had not been replaced even after two years. Teachers of vocational institutions felt the indifference toward their workplaces to be peculiar. Struggling to teach under the restrictions of the pandemic, many teachers resorted to sharing YouTube links with students instead of actually letting them use and work the machinery. The inadequacy is reflected in the lack of funding for vocational institutions, recruitment and professional development of teachers, and active collaboration with industries.

Dignity of Labour/Dignity of Learning

Our discussions with teachers, families, students and administrators would frequently arrive at the point of work and its value in India. Given the strong history and presence of caste in every occupation, it is fairly easy to separate high-risk, physically demanding jobs from white collar jobs, and the class/caste locations of those who engage in different forms of work. Despite their need and relevance, vocational skills and the institutions offering these courses are perceived to be less rigorous and less important. The battle between perceptions and prejudices is also connected to material reality. While students eventually earn good money, most of them spend their initial years working on a meagre salary. It is also important to note the widespread belief against the need for thorough training for jobs in the vocational sector. The policy position to expand vocational education and introduce skill-based training is a useful step, but it does little to restore dignity and aspirations among students entering vocational programmes.

Working Students at the Centre

In our interactions during the workshops, we met young students who have been working on farms, in shops and garages, and assisting their parents in their occupations. Work was always a part of life for many of these students, who had either grown up with a single parent or had to pitch in to help their families tackle financial difficulties. What makes a working student? Why are they invisibilised in education policy as well in the glossy brochures of educational institutions? Since work and learning happen simultaneously, working students face the challenge of keeping up to participate and do well. Many of the students we spoke with wanted to use their vocational degree to apply for state-level government jobs, police and military recruitment. Others hoped to become professionally stable in the next few years.

Returning our Attention to Vocational Education

As an important stream that connects education, skills and employment, vocational and skill-based education must be strengthened. We present below possible ways in which this can be done:

- To counter the popular prejudice prevalent against vocational education, policy positions need to be unequivocally clear about its importance. Funding existing vocational educational institutions and increasing their quality is critical. Recent attempts involving public–private partnerships in imparting skill training have helped expand the sector, but there is hardly any exchange between vocational institutions and skill-training centres.

- A district-wise mapping of employment opportunities can be done and short courses can be developed.
- Students' work and skills acquired therein need to be considered favourably as they apply for admissions, whether in vocational or academic tracks. There must be a system to recognise those learning while working. Provisions must be made for students to "re-enrol and return" to education in case they had to take a break in order to work.
- Skill-based short-term courses can be moved to the vicinity of informal and formal workplaces for students so that they can take advantage of these provisions.
- Distance education and open education need to be strengthened.

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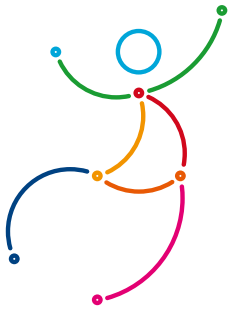
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