

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

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Abstract: This study investigates the nature of relationship between socio-economic status and the selection of vocational education courses by adolescents in India. Data provided by the Annual Status of Education Report, 2017 and Government of India's parameters on different states have been analyzed to understand the relationship between these two variables. As indicated by previous studies, it is observed that states with lower socio-economic standards have higher enrollment for vocational courses.

Key words–vocational education, socio-economic status, technical education, skill development

I. INTRODUCTION

At a time where unemployment in the country is not only an economic problem but a burning issue which has the potential to shape the political scenario of the nation, it is inevitable to have a debate on the necessity of vocational education. The need for vocational education had gained impetus in the National Education Policy, 1986 and its pivotal role in providing employment and contribution to the nation's economic development has been emphasized ever since. This study will look in to the reasons behind the lackluster participation in vocational education, the role that socio-economic status plays in the selection of vocational courses and suggest some measures through which vocational education, more appropriately called, career education, can become more acceptable to people from all socio-economic backgrounds.

II. Vocational Education in India

As per the All India Council for Technical Education, Vocational Education, also known as Career and Technical Education (CTE), prepares learners for jobs that are based in manual or practical activities, traditionally non-academic and totally related to a specific trade, occupation or vocation.

As per the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2017, overall, about 5% of youth are taking some type of vocational training or other courses. This includes those who are enrolled in school or college as well as those who are not currently enrolled. Overall, only about 5.3% youth age 14-18 are enrolled in such courses and among those who are not currently enrolled in the formal education system this percentage is only slightly higher at 6.2%. This means that the Indian youth, whether enrolled in formal education system or not, is largely outside the ambit of vocational education. Either there is no proper information dispersal about these courses or they do not fare well in a cost-benefit analysis.

The unpopularity of vocational courses is reflected in the low enrollment rates in these courses.

Table 1: % Youth Taking Vocational Training or Other Courses, By Age

age	taking vocational training or other courses	not taking vocational training or other courses	total
14-16	2.7	97.3	100
17-18	10.6	89.4	100
All youth	5.6	94.4	100

(Source: ASER, 2017)

Ahmed (2016) has also observed that choice of vocational and technical education often is a 'second choice' and that there is a global decline in its participation.

The popular options available to students interested in pursuing vocational education after Grade X include polytechnic courses and Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs). These include courses like Architectural Assistantship, Automobile Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Food Technology, Leather Technology, Medical Laboratory Technology, Plastic Technology, Textile Technology and other courses akin to these.

Once a student opts for these courses, their educational trajectory becomes significantly different from those following the route of general education. At this young age, it is not an easy task to decide upon such high stake career decisions more so if proper information is not available at their disposition. Many such courses are also available after Grade XII. These generally include courses in Pharmacy, Modern Office Practices, etc. But in this case, students would have already limited their options by selecting a particular academic stream after Grade X. Once a student opts for a vocational course after Grade X, it is not possible for him or her to go into main stream academics later, say, an engineering course. Therefore, only that population is interested in such courses which are aiming to start earning early on with no plans for further education.

III. Vocational Education and Socio-Economic Status

One of the main reasons why people from higher economic strata do not prefer vocational education for their wards is the stigma attached with it. It is believed that these courses will land up their wards in blue collar jobs which are not very respectful and it is unfortunate that this perception is often based on superfluous job titles which are often not backed by a matching financial incentive. For example, a student may earn a lot more per day if he opens a tailoring shop after undergoing a vocational course in textiles and stitching but his parents will be more proud if he lands up in a private corporate job designated as marketing executive with just half the amount of earnings. This has a social aspect as well because even the marriage prospects of the same boy are affected by his job title.

Another reason because of which people from the higher socio-economic strata do not opt for vocational courses is its lack of integration with higher education. Even though many people would prefer to have their wards lend them a helping hand financially, they often fear that this may turn out to be a selfish gesture on their part because their ward may be isolated from liberal education for life. This is further accentuated by the social trend of completing education first, then entering the job market, settle down and then carry on the social engagements of getting married and kids. This mostly follows a linear path where the concept of lifelong learning, professional sabbaticals are often unheard of. Since, education will not be revisited along this linear path, parents want their wards to spend as much time as they want on education and collect as many degrees and certificates as they can before they become too engaged to delve in to any further learning activities.

People from lower economic strata do put their faith in education though largely private education (Rukmani, 2014). They aspire for quality education for their children which they hope will pull them out of the poverty rut. But at the same time they are not over ambitious because success is also a relative term. Ali, McWhirter and Chronister (2005) showed that individuals from a lower social class generally had less career-related self-efficacy when it came to vocational aspirations. Thus, they are more content with a vocational course which gives instant returns rather than investing many years in general education without any guarantee of gainful employment. ASER, 2017 has also proved this contention as it found that youth who take vocational courses tend to take short duration courses of 6 months or less. Further, of those who are doing vocational courses, the highest percentage of youth (34%) are enrolled in courses which are 3 months or shorter, and another 25% are enrolled in courses between 4 and 6 months in duration. This indicates that students who are interested in vocational

courses are willing to invest only a small amount of time because courses of longer duration imply opportunity costs in terms of loss of earnings that they could have earned in the meanwhile.

Alternatively, those from higher social class backgrounds tend to be more successful in developing career aspirations and are generally better prepared for the world of work because of access to resources such as career offices, guidance counselors, better schools, high level “social actors,” and familial experience with higher education (Diemer & Ali, 2009). Many other studies have also found that racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic barriers generally hinder individuals’ vocational development (Diemer & Blustein, 2007).

The claim that vocational education is more popular in the lower economic strata is evident in the case of many Indian states. Take Bihar, for example. As per Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation (2014-15), it has the lowest per capita income of Rs. 31380 among all states and the lowest social progress index of 44.89 as per the Institute for Competitiveness (2017). However, around 5.8% of its youth is engaged in vocational education whereas Meghalaya with almost double per capita income at Rs. 68202 and social progress index of 53.51 has the lowest enrollment in vocational courses at 0.9%. Gujarat with per capita income of Rs.124678 which is around four times the per capita income of Bihar and social progress index of 56.65 has only 3.1% of youth enrolled in vocational education. Similarly, Karnataka with per capita income of Rs. 132880 and social progress index of 59.72 has a mere 1.6% enrollment in vocational courses.

IV. Reviving Vocational Education

Despite various efforts vocational education has failed to become mainstream. Now, amidst the talk of entrepreneurial skill development and the advent of the National Skill Development Agency (NSDA), a fresh look needs to be taken at such courses and a complete overhaul is required. In the coming years, NSDA will play a critical role in coordinating and harmonizing the approach to skill development among various Central Ministries/Departments, State Governments, the National Skill Development Corporation and the private sector (Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship, 2016).

One way of making such courses more popular is by designing bridge courses that connect vocational courses to more academically inclined higher education avenues. When avenues of higher education will be open to students, they will more willingly take up such courses and moreover it will take care of their career growth and professional development.

Another useful measure is to tailor the vocational courses to the need of the labour market. In order to achieve this, more industrial and corporate participation is required. To improve infrastructure, both physical and intellectual, sponsorship from prospective employers may be sought.

Further, information regarding these courses should be made available in such a manner that youth who are enrolled in the formal education system as well as those who are not enrolled in any formal education system become aware of these opportunities. Parents and guardians of these youth need to become the audience of such information because at the adolescent stage many career decisions are made on the behalf of students by them.

The stigma related to vocational courses needs to be removed as well. It is only possible through promoting individuals who followed the trajectory of vocational education and attained success. Such success stories need to be told and retold. Another approach is to change the nomenclature used for vocational education. It should be promoted as career education emphasizing the fact that the basic contention behind these courses is to empower the youth to equip them with the skills essential to find a rewarding career.

In addition, students' aptitude should be measured using a vast array of career interest tests available so that in the long run, they select more fulfilling careers and thus attrition rates and their accompanied costs could be minimized. The Central Board of Secondary Education has also stressed the importance of career related decisions early in life by starting to conduct an aptitude examination known as the Student's Global Aptitude Index (SGAI) for Class X students studying in schools affiliated to CBSE. SGAI aims at initiating a dialogue on the decision-making of academic choices among various stakeholders besides empowering a student since subject choices of a student are very often dictated by parents' expectations, peer pressure, social prestige and many other external factors (Ganguly, 2013).

V. Conclusion

Systemic reforms focusing on revival of vocational institutions can surely bring vocational education to life and help realize the goals of 'Make in India' and inclusive progress. The onus to change the societal perception of these courses rests as much on the authorities as on individuals.

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