



Maitra, S. and Maitra, S. (2021) Training to be entrepreneurial: Examining vocational education programmes for young women in Industrial Training Institutes (ITI) in Kolkata. In: Eigenmann, P., Gonon, P. and Weil, M. (eds.) *Opening and Extending Vocational Education*. Series: Studies in vocational and continuing education. Peter Lang: Berlin. ISBN 9783034334877

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Deposited on: 3 March 2022

Training to be Entrepreneurial: Examining Vocational Education Programmes for Young Women in Industrial Training Institutes (ITI) in Kolkata

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Abstract: Since the 1990s there has been a growing need to develop workers who are entrepreneurial and adept in behavioural, interpersonal and inter-functional skills to fit the changing nature of jobs in the emerging urban service labour market of Kolkata, the capital of the eastern state of West Bengal, India. Skill training, under the aegis of contemporary vocational training in state-funded Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), is no longer restricted to imparting the hard skills necessary for accessing industrial employment. Rather, it extends to work on students' dispositions – by stoking their aspirations for 'middle-class' ideals of social mobility and life-styles without the actual economic and social advantages of middle-classness. This chapter focuses predominantly on female students from socio-economically marginalised backgrounds in order to firstly highlight the rising popularity of vocational education amongst young women eager to access the urban service labour market in Kolkata. Secondly, such an emphasis foregrounds the gendered and classed norms of contemporary vocational education valued by the service industries, including flexibility, neatness and docility. By drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality, we suggest how skill training programmes can become a mechanism for regulating and implanting in workers an entrepreneurial attitude so that they become not only economically productive, malleable and disciplined workers, but also accountable for their own lives. The premium placed on the individual initiatives of young students thereby absolves vocational educational institutions or the state of the larger structural fallout from unemployment and labour market vulnerabilities.

Keywords: vocational education, Industrial Training Institute, young people, skill, aspiration

Introduction

With its strategic advantages as a port city and as the administrative and financial epicentre of British colonial India, Kolkata's rise in prominence as India's manufacturing hub, especially in industries such as jute and engineering since the late 19th century, has been indisputable. However, the post-colonial decades, particularly especially after the 1970s, have been less favourable to the city (and the eastern Indian state of West Bengal whose administrative capital is Kolkata), in terms of industrial development. The stagnation and de-industrialisation of the city coincided with the long period of the coalition government led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) that ruled West Bengal from 1977–2011. The period from the 1970s to the 1990s saw worsening capital-labour relationships characterised by frequent industrial strikes, violent labour confrontations and ultimately a mass out-migration of industrial capital away from Kolkata (Kohli, 2012; Nandi, 2005). Unemployment and escalating levels of poverty followed as inevitable consequences. The CPI(M) led West Bengal government came

under trenchant criticism for its lack of initiative in developing the industrial infrastructure along with a skilled and disciplined workforce in its administrative capital.

From the late 1990s, the Communist government began to view economic liberalisation as critical for improving conditions of 'Third World' poverty persisting in Kolkata (Hutnyk, 1996). The insertion of the city from its earlier models of state led developmental initiatives into global flows of corporate capital and market-driven economies was, however, happening at a time when most of the older manufacturing and industrial bases had already collapsed along with a decline in long-term, secure employment, especially for the economically vulnerable sections of the urban populations (Maitra & Maitra, 2015, 2018). Concurrent to this process of de-industrialisation, the privatisation initiatives of the CPI(M) government saw a parallel rise in service sector industries in Kolkata from the late 1990s (Maitra & Maitra, 2018).

These service sector industries, such as organised retail, increasingly came to be characterised by the global standards and forms of flexible work regimes that necessitated a reinvention of the urban worker-subject who was no longer disciplined according to the needs of industrial production with its emphasis on routinised factory labour regimes (Foucault, 1990). The newly emerging urban service worker in Kolkata from the 1990s had to learn and imbibe certain specific skills just like urban service workers in many other parts of the world. Such skills had to do with the qualities of being entrepreneurial, self-regulated, competitive, flexible and capable of ensuring her/his own success under diminishing labour welfare regulations by external agencies such as the state (Maitra & Maitra, 2015).

This historical shift in the labour practices and the consequent skill requirements expected of young workers in Kolkata was hardly to be accomplished smoothly especially given that the city as well as the state of West Bengal have always lagged behind other industrially developed spaces in India in terms of quality skill training opportunities for young people. Poor curriculum, indifferent governmental interest in vocational education and inadequate teaching staff in state funded vocational institutes like the Industrial Training institutes (ITIs), have been suggested as some of the historical reasons which have severely affected the supply of trained workers – especially for the blue-collar urban workforce in the manufacturing sector (Banerjee et al., 2002). However, following the emergence of the service sector economy¹ in Kolkata and West Bengal from the late 1990s, there was a growing need to develop workers who were adept in behavioural, inter-personal and inter-functional skills to fit the changing nature of jobs in the emerging urban service labour market.

Accordingly, the current West Bengal government engaged in dialogues with the World Bank and other private institutions to promote training that is effective, demand-driven and perhaps most importantly suited for the requirements of private service industries (Goel, 2009; PFPL, 2012). With vocational training identified as key to developing the state's workforce that is expected to grow from 23.9 million to 31.8 million workers by 2022 (National Skill Development Corporation, 2013), courses have been revamped in more than 200 ITIs in West Bengal today, to include programmes catering to both service and industrial sectors such as Beauty and Wellness, Tourism and Hospitality, Healthcare, IT/ITES together with Construction, Automotive, Capital Goods and Manufacturing. What is particularly interesting is the introduction of

courses like 'Employability Skills', which are offered to all students registered in the ITIs since 2011 irrespective of their particular choice of specialisation. The objective of the course is to teach students behavioural, communicational and entrepreneurial skills, indeed life-style skills, that are transferable across occupations and aligned with the requirements of global service capital.

This paper explores the effects of these new formulations of skill training that seeks to re-form the entire disposition of young female students entering the labour force after completing their regime of skill training in ITI. Our focus on former and present female students high- lights both the increased participation of young women in Kolkata's urban service industries through formalised vocational education as evident in a recent World Bank report (Maitra & Maitra, 2018; World Bank, 2013), as well as to suggest the gendered norms of certain key aspects of skill training valued by the service industries, such as flexibility and docility, being emphasised in vocational educational institutions.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality, we suggest how skill training programmes offered under the aegis of contemporary vocational training can become a mechanism for regulating and implanting in workers the desire to be "self-responsible, self-enterprising and self-governing" subjects (Ong & Zhang, 2008, p. 3). Govern- mentality is understood here as a set of techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour that includes certain modes of training and modification of individuals, "not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes in living out life" (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). By modulating students' "speech, forms of social interaction and bodily appearances" through ITI mandated courses such as 'Employability Skills' (Maitra & Maitra, 2015), the training programmes aim to instil within them an entrepreneurial attitude so that they become not only economically productive, malleable and disciplined workers, but also accountable for their own "labor [sic] market fates" (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997, p. 28).

Such regulation and control of workers, where courses such as 'Employability Skills' repeatedly emphasise the importance of students being amenable to and fully internalising forms of corporate control for surviving in the labour market, are necessary for validating neoliberal capital-labour relationships in contemporary India. As elsewhere in India, ITIs in West Bengal are posited against conventional academic education, as a site of training with a high impact on formal vocational education (Pilz, 2016). They are considered crucial institutions for providing skill training at the intermediate levels and are assumed to smooth the pathway to successful careers in manufacturing, construction and the service sector for young trainees. To do so, the students are exposed repeatedly to the benefits of being both flexible as well as receptive to the most stringent forms of corporate and capitalist control. Yet, as scholars point out, the actual employment options available to ITI graduates, who mostly come from disadvantaged backgrounds, are usually those that are low-end, part-time, casualised, precarious and vulnerable to exploitation (Sarkar, 2019). Unemployment rates are also high among VET students (Agrawal, 2014) due to shrinking number of high paid, high skilled jobs and a mismatch between training and skills demanded in the labour market.

Given the above conditions, the discourse of entrepreneurialism is a way of diffusing the vulnerability and uncertainty of the neoliberal labour market by governing young people to believe that they need to be autonomous and self-reliant by taking responsibility for their own futures (du Gay, 1991). They are motivated to become self-directed, have capacities to survive conditions of distress in the labour market and aspirations to continuously improve their performance in order to remain successful economic subjects in the labour market. To anticipate our argument through the examples offered in this paper later, we would like to suggest here that the regulation of potential workers through their internalisation of qualities like social aspirations, entrepreneurialism and self-disciplining provide a key insight into the specific ideological thrust of skill training in Kolkata's contemporary ITIs. Any success or failure is, therefore, put on the initiative of the students themselves, thereby absolving vocational educational institutions or the government from taking any responsibility for addressing larger and more structural issues of unemployment and labour market theorising Neoliberal Governmentality

Michel Foucault has highlighted how in the neoliberal era, the notion of governing has shifted from the specific control over territory or property to population – a more pervasive attempt at governing people, their relations, customs, habits and even the way they act and think (Foucault, 1991). The essential logic behind the deployment of this notion of governing is not coercion or violence, but the “management of population in its depths and its details” (Foucault, 1991, p. 102). Thus, individuals are governed through certain non-coercive techniques that “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain” success and economic productivity (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Governing, thus can be described as the “conduct of conduct,” a practice that “ranges from ‘governing the self’ to ‘governing others’ ” (Lemke, 2000, p. 12).

Extending Foucault's conceptualisation of governmentality, Rose (1992), points out how regulation and the disciplining of selves are conducted through regulatory procedures and strategies provided by a range of experts such as social workers, counselors, advisors, or psychologists. These experts, through different work-related training and programmes, encourage individuals to steer their own selves, to govern and control the self in such a way so that she/he can take control of her/his career and turn themselves into high achievers (Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose, 1992). So, with citizens who are unemployed or underemployed, this expertise promises to “break through the blockages that trap ... [them] into powerlessness and passivity, into undemanding jobs and underachievement” (Rose, 1992, p. 151). Yet, at the same time, these regulatory practices are not designed to create compliant individuals absolutely dependent on these services, but to equip them with certain tools so that they are able to manage their affairs, take control of their goals and make plans for future achievements (Rose, 1992).

This concept of the enterprising self in the neoliberal economy might seem to be neutral: molding and preparing individuals to acquire certain qualities needed for success in a rapidly shifting society driven by market forces. Yet, scholars draw attention to the processes of regulation and hegemonic domination underlying the concept that govern people to be compliant. Discussing the enterprising theory in relation to the neoliberal labour market, many scholars (du Gay 1996; Fenwick, 2001;

Garrick & Usher, 2000) indicate how the ethos of enterprising selves tends to dominate worker-subjectivity and promotes compliance to the culture of enterprising principles. They point out how this particular ethos that shapes individuals to become active and self-regulated empowered selves “works through infiltrating regulation into the very interior of the experience of subjects” (Garrick & Usher, 2000, para. 10). Workers are thus subtly compelled to change their subjectivity and to embark on a process of self-management to fit the enterprising culture of the labour market, its uncertainties and its opportunities. In fact, this compliance is created through a “seduction through ‘empowerment’” so that “issues of power and ‘discipline’ (in the sense both of control of bodies and of bodies of knowledge) no longer seem so visible and relevant although it would be a mistake to assume from this that they have disappeared or are irrelevant” (Garrick & Usher, 2000, para. 15). After Miller and Rose (1990), this seductive sense of empowerment can perhaps be also translated as aspiration as technologies of government not only seek to “normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions [but also] aspirations [to achieve the desirable]” (p. 8). Scholarly research in the global North for example, has indicated how the rhetoric of aspiration has been utilised by policy-makers and governments to regulate young people to work on their lives. Drawing on governmentality approaches these scholars have argued that the discourse of raising aspiration not only “individualizes responsibility” but also “proliferates a deficit view of young people” often along the social fault lines of class, gender and race (Spohrer, Stahl & Bowers-Brown, 2018, p. 328). Valorisation of aspiration thus works as a governing technology to simplify and mute the severities and complexities of the neoliberal labour market where young people imagine themselves to work and simultaneously blame socio-economic “problems on those who ‘fall behind’ due to a supposed ‘poverty of aspiration’ ” (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan & Gale, 2015, pp. 228–229).

Research Method

The discussions in this paper are based on our current qualitative research project that examines the impacts of soft skill training imparted through vocational education in ITIs on young marginalised female workers in Kolkata. A recent expansion in the organised retail sector in Kolkata has led to a rise in jobs in sales, marketing and customer relations that require workers (predominantly women) to learn about new forms of work organisation and socialisation (Gooptu, 2009), making the city an ideal location to carry out this study. Additionally, the state government has massively invested in the development of vocational education programmes, particularly those geared towards the service sector economy and self-employment.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-five current female ITI students. These interviews focused on the training, aspirations, hopes and fears of the students concerning their job prospects and future social mobility based on their ITI training. Interviewees were identified through snowball sampling. More structured interviews with pre-circulated questionnaires were conducted with ten faculty members in the ITIs selected for the study, in order to explore how faculty members perceived the current institutional and course structures as relevant for skill-training

and the employability of students. Finally, key-informant interviews were conducted on the continuing relevance and importance of the ITIs with five members of the Directorate General of Training (DGT) and Directorate of Vocational Education and Training (DVET), which supervise the ITIs in India and West Bengal respectively.

Five focus group discussions were also conducted with twenty-five female alumni from the ITIs selected for the study. The discussions focused on how relevant the skill training has been as imparted by the ITIs for securing employment, the possibilities for career advancement through industrial training, and the difficulties in labour market integration faced by the former students of these institutions. Participants in the focus groups were identified through snowball sampling as well as through referrals by the current ITI faculties.

In the following sections, we will discuss how through specialised skill-training programmes like that of 'Employability Skills', women students were regulated to become entrepreneurial and in management of themselves. The entrepreneurial skills were evident in how students learned to remain motivated, aspirational and proactive in finding employment for themselves. The students, even when they were unable to enter the labour market, held themselves responsible for such lack rather than being critical of the labour market. The self-management skills instilled within women the need to remain flexible and adaptable. For example, even when many of them were unable to find jobs in their own sector, they would look for employment in other sectors believing that such flexibility is the demand of the current market. Self-management was also evident in students becoming more disciplined and committed towards their career even when such career development took unexpected and potentially uncertain turns.

Analysing Vocational Education Programmes in ITIs

The Directorate General of Training² (DGT) under the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship (MSDE) in India offers a range of vocational training courses catering to the needs of both the manufacturing and service sectors of the Indian labour market. The vocational training programs are delivered under the aegis of National Council of Vocational Training (NCVT). Craftsman Training Scheme (CTS) and Apprenticeship Training Scheme (ATS) are two pioneer programs of NCVT for propagating vocational training. All trades under CTS and ATS have a mandatory 'Employability Skill' mandate that students have to learn as part of their curriculum. According to DGT officials, employability skills have been introduced in recent years to complement hard skill training and are deemed important not only at the workplace, especially in the service sector but also outside in the larger society. The competency-based course replaced the previous Social Studies course and is mainly taught by instructors who have MBA or graduation in subjects like sociology or economics along with training in employability skills from DGT institutes.

Implanting entrepreneurial skills

Twelve modules are taught under 'Employability Skills' such as behavioural skills,

English literacy, communication, entrepreneurship, essential skills for success, preparation for the world of work and others. As one of the instructors in 'Employability Skills' in a Kolkata based ITI informed us, the key purpose of such course modules is not simply to teach a few phrases of English communication but to evoke aspirations in young students to strive for the best in terms of their productive output. Even when the immediate rewards, such as remunerations for the job may not be too high, students are asked to give their best for the corporate concerns they will be employed in. The instructor in question frequently highlighted this aspect of striving for excellence during his classes by showing short motivational videos of successful men and women who started their life under various forms of disadvantage but rose to prominence through hard work and the capacity to give their best even under duress.

One of his favourite motivational stories for students concerned a previous alumni of his ITI who had initially found contractual employment as a low-paid shop floor worker in a global fast-food chain in Kolkata but had quickly risen to the position of a manager through her hard and dedicated work for the company. One of his other motivational stories centred on a young girl who after graduating from the ITI could only find employment as a security guard with low wages. Yet, the person in question had remained undeterred and managed to successfully start a small business providing female security staff to corporate companies. In essence, what this instructor specifically, or courses such as 'Employability Skills' in general, do is to create a climate of aspirations for the young students in the classroom who are shown that labour market insecurities are natural and potentially present for every individual. Only those who are capable of successfully internalising and manifesting the right qualities – of hard work, flexibility, ability to negotiate initial disadvantages, being entrepreneurial – are going to be successful in the end. Thus, such courses create a naturalised dimension of the precarious labour market under conditions of privatisation and the deregulation of state protection for young students who are told to view the disappearance of employment securities, standard employment relationships and the emergence of "precarious work and new, increasingly entrepreneurial non-standard forms of employment" (Moisander, Groß, & Eräranta, 2018, p. 377) as a 'natural' fact of life.

Moreover, to be successful in this new economy, workers are expected to engage in lifelong learning, adapt, innovate and be flexible enough to survive periods of unemployment and lack of secured employment conditions. The onus is on individual workers to "build up his or her own human capital – in other words, to 'be an entrepreneur of her/himself'" (Ong, 2003, p. 12). Consequently, those who are unable to take control of their own lives are perceived as burdens on the economy and the state (Aguar, 2006). The unemployed or the underclass are hence labelled as "unenterprising" (Heelas & Morris, 1992, p. 8) and are made to believe that they "have only themselves to blame if they do not bother to set about improving their circumstances" (Heelas & Morris, 1992, p. 8). The neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse thus treats social ailments such as poverty or unemployment (Fenwick, 2002) as a "lack", based not on any kind of social, economic or political inequalities (Garrick & Usher, 2000) but on individual failure.

Inculcating gendered and classed 'habits'

The complex process of implanting entrepreneurialism within students was also

evident through most of the interviews with students and alumni. *Amina*³, for example, was a young vibrant 19-year-old who grew up in an extended Muslim agricultural family in rural Baruipur located in the southern fringes of Kolkata. She had lost her father at a nearly age and her mother had to work as domestic help to support the family. Unlike her two elder sisters who were married; early, *Amina* wanted to finish her high school and then join vocational education in order to secure an employment for herself. She had learned about the prospects of joining a vocational institution like the ITI from her high school teachers. Yet, joining an ITI was not an easy decision as she was heavily criticised by neighbours and extended kin members as they felt vocational education was mostly for men seeking jobs in the physically demanding factory environments; it was definitely not supposed to be meant for young women like *Amina*. Her immediate family members and especially her mother were nonetheless supportive of *Amina*'s eventual decision to join an ITI. Her high school grades enabled her to register for the Cosmetology course, a decision, which was influenced by what the ITI teachers advised her at the start of joining. *Amina* reminisced:

“Principal sir (the ITI principal) asked me to join Cosmetology. He told me it's a safe sector as mostly women work there and I can get a good job in one of the lavish, upscale beauty parlours in Kolkata. He told me about other students who were working successfully”.

Amina was convinced as she has herself noted the boom in beauty parlours and spas even in a place like Baruipur, where “young women worked, dressed smartly in nice uniforms”.

Cosmetology was a one-year course during which *Amina* was trained in both the professional skills that would qualify her to work as a beautician along with employability skills that emphasised the importance of communication, being pleasant and courteous to prospective clients and being attentive to the profit motives of the organisation she would be working in. Professional skills and knowledge consisted of learning about hair and skin care, make up, cosmetics, yoga, meditation and client consultation. Employability on the other hand included communication in simple English, body language, active listening skills, motivational training, behavioural skills and entrepreneurship. The importance of yoga and meditation was repeatedly emphasised in both her professional and soft skill training courses in order to retain her composure during long working hours, dealing with potentially irate customers and to enable her to stand for long periods of time without her body slouching or showing evidences of being tired. Her instructors repeatedly reminded her that dealing with difficult or unsatisfied customers and the long hours of standing were the most common professional problems faced by entry-level beauticians working in spas or salons. *Amina* shared her training experiences with us:

“Our job is client facing. So there was a lot of emphasis on how to communicate, and always keep a smile on our face. Our body language is important”.

When *Amina* was asked what she meant by body language, she promptly replied:

“You know how we stand or walk... we cannot slouch, we need to be smart and confident”.

The need to appear smart and confident was shared by some of the other women interviewees as well. *Sajia, Rima, Nandini* and a few others from the course mentioned how professional etiquette and dress code were also part of the body language. They were taught how to maintain eye contact with the customers, to maintain a nice smile to make the customer feel comfortable, to engage in conversations with the clients and be gentle in handling them. Gentle demeanour, it seemed was an emphasis in the course. In fact, one of the teachers described how women's bodies were regulated to make them suitable for the industry:

"Most of these women come from lower class backgrounds and they have no idea how the industry works. So we have to teach them for hours how to conduct themselves when with clients... it is difficult to train them initially but it is also a practice. We show them how to smile, how to sit, stand, walk with a straight back, and be comfortable in trousers and skirts".

One of the issues that came up in this context was neatness. *Rima* pointed out that neatness training meant not only learning to maintain the neatness and hygiene of the workstation but also of personal selves as well:

"Clean clothes, clean nails, shampooed hair are important lessons. The instructors were very clear that we can't be smelling of sweat or food. Clean socks and shoes are also essential".

One of the instructors added more about the issue of neatness. She indicated that:

"These girls do not understand hygiene. Because of their backgrounds, we have to be very careful. We ask them to practice hygiene at home as well. We tell them that it is not enough to learn this for their work only. Only when they practice at home will neatness become a habit".

The instructor's observation makes evident how the "inculcation of habits" is one of the simplest but potentially most effective mechanisms of governmentality (Miller and Rose, 1990). In this connection, it is important to note that most of the 'habits' relating to bodily demeanours or hygienic standards prescribed for students have an overt classist dimension. Both the study materials as well the instructors for the ITI courses imparting soft skill training to students, take for granted that the young students would be coming from socio-economically depressed backgrounds who would be lacking in the professional qualities such as etiquette, bodily hygiene or effective communication. The inculcation of what are seen as 'professional/employable habits' are seen as critical remedial measures to address the fundamental lack of such skills in young students to make them attuned to job market requirements. It is hoped that through repetition, these professional habits will become a kind of 'second-nature' for the students who are then able to elide or erase their real socio-economic marginalities during the course of work.

These forms of remedial interventions emanate from processes for identifying the failure or deficit in both individual and collective bodies of workers that need to be

addressed and worked upon during the course of training: in line with the principles of governmentality – the deficiencies of the worker bodies provide the nodal point for intervention as well as justification for seeking to root them out by intervening into the personal and work lives of individuals (Miller & Rose, 1990). In a similar vein, we see how teachers and instructors (usually coming from a more middle-class milieu in comparison to the students) construct young students coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds as deficit and in need of 'help'. Training in neatness and personal hygiene is then expected to shape and manage the students' ability to live a clean and respectable life and most importantly, be economically productive through the employment opportunities that will come because of the inculcation of the right habits.

Staying motivated

Another important aspect of 'Employability Skill' training especially emphasised in study modules was the need to stay motivated. *Neela* for instance came from a small business family. Her father ran a small grocery store in a reputed market in Kolkata while her mother did sewing from home. After completing her ITI certification in Cosmetology, *Neela* was successful in finding a job as an entry-level beautician in a spa located in one of the upcoming neighbourhoods in Kolkata. Employment in the spa was hardly lucrative given the low level of wages offered to her as trainee beautician; still it did bring in an income of about four thousand rupees per month, enough to contribute to the family income pool. However, at the time of the interview, *Neela* had lost her position at the spa without any certainty of landing another job. What was interesting to note in her was her ability to remain motivated and positive. As *Neela* pointed out:

"You know there's nothing wrong with my training. It was my fault that I lost the job. I was finding it difficult to adjust to the fast pace of the spa. But I have learned a lesson. I will be more attentive and focus more on my work. It was my fault in losing this first opportunity but more such opportunities will come if I try hard (...)."

While her economic situation made *Neela* especially anxious and desperate to find a new job, she also knew from her experience that employment as a beautician or hairdresser in Kolkata's low-end beauty parlours and salons rarely offered stable, long-term prospects with any real job security, employment benefits or long term prospects for social mobility. Salons and other similar institutions where *Neela* had been working typically offer low wages and employment often is terminated during lean periods depending upon the need to retain a core staff of experienced beauticians. When asked what helped *Neela* to stay motivated given the uncertain nature of employment in her line of work, she responded:

"You know, our teachers were really good. They prepared us for everything. They told us that sometimes we may have difficulty getting employment or may have to work in low paid jobs...set backs happen. That's part of life. But commitment to work and positivity are important".

Neela further reported that as part of their training, they were often shown statistics or snippets from studies that had messages like how graduates are not getting

employment in India or there are high rates of unemployment. Students were asked to discuss these issues in class and come up with strategies to stay positive if they ever had to face situations like this after graduation. Teachers would also in most cases reiterate the need for more training to remain competitive in the labour market.

Ria, another female student, who was in the last few months of her course also spoke about motivation,

“Motivation is very important otherwise we cannot progress. Our teacher in ITI told us during the course that there is a power in positive attitude – positive feelings always help. We have to keep a positive attitude in life and we will do well in life. You know sky is the limit”.

Other students mentioned setting up personal goals or remaining aware of what they want to do in life were important. As *Pinki*, another student from a peasant family mentioned:

“We need to be responsible and confident of ourselves. Unless we do that we can never get good jobs”.

A related activity in the course was described where students were asked to identify what they were good at so that they could then work towards their goal. The module emphasised students to learn about themselves, to motivate themselves and aspire for the best. Corroborating the above observations by the students, one of the teachers emphasised the need to become proactive for students:

“We tell our girls learn to take responsibility now. These are young girls and if they do not learn to be proactive and smart they will never build their career. So in our training we tell them repeatedly that it is a competitive world. No one is going to come to them with a job. They will have to find their own way to success. And we are giving them the tools to do so (...) the skill training is important”.

Building aspirations

Such motivational activities are also geared towards building aspirations for young women. Women are taught to invest in their dreams so that they are able to remain optimistic and imagine a rewarding economic future. What such optimistic messages hide is how in the neoliberal labour market, aspirations can be contingent as well. Such reality, however, are programmed in a way so that aspiration is normalised (Miller & Rose, 1990). This normalisation of affective feelings like being motivated erase the real disjuncture students face as they negotiate an increasingly precarious labour market after their graduation from the ITIs. The problems of periodic joblessness, extremely low wage levels and other forms of professional exploitation are seen as barriers to be overcome through the so-called power of positive motivation. It is also important to note here that what instructors and course modules implant in students are really middle-class fantasies of professional success and the ability to eventually find secured employment opportunities – without however having the middle-class safety nets of high levels of family income, quality (non-vocational) professional education from

reputed universities or the kinds of social contacts that are critical for making these middle-class aspirations come true. The obverse of these motivational training is that economically disadvantaged students in ITIs often internalise the discourses about their own deficiencies – like being professionally inept, lazy, not being able to communicate properly and so on – when they face repeated failures over long periods of time in securing the kinds of professional development promised by the current regimes of skill-training in Kolkata's ITIs.

Skills for self-management

Another crucial locus of intervention for changing the disposition of students was in imparting the skills for self-management of the ITI students. For example, one of the alumni *Purnima* decided to 'wait-out' periods of unemployment after finishing her course in Cosmetology. Coming from a relatively affluent background, she was in fact considering taking courses in 'Spoken English' in order to apply for jobs in the call centre industry:

"I am not fluent in English. I learnt some basic English in the institute, but I thought I will learn more. Job opportunities are more if I can speak English especially in the call-centre industry".

For *Purnima* as well as a very large number of students interviewed for our research, service sector jobs such as in call-centres, provided one of the key locations for finding employment even though students were aware that often such jobs did not actually utilise any of the skill sets related to the courses typically taught by the ITI. However, the advantage of accepting jobs in the services or retail industries is that they could continue to stay with their families and explore various other options for employment including appearing for competitive public examinations for securing government jobs.

Bharati, who was trained as a Computer Operator, suggested that her present work at a café chain gave her the opportunity to regularly appear for government service-related examinations. Moreover, she liked to often take extra shifts and save as much of the money as possible so that she can eventually open a tuition centre herself preparing students coming from similar backgrounds as hers for secondary examination. With a relatively large number of entry-level jobs available in the services industries in Kolkata presently, *Bharati* does not see any problems in getting her job back in the café if she is not successful in running her own tuition centre:

"I have to keep my options open. Although there are many jobs in malls and coffee shops but there is also competition. Many women are joining those jobs. So I am trying for government jobs but if I don't get that so I am also working in the café".

Completing her final year in Secretarial Practices, *Urmi* informed us that she has already contacted several friends who might refer her for a retail job in large shopping malls in Kolkata. She is particularly interested in back office work within shopping malls that usually involves low level of administrative work. She was hopeful that her post-secondary government accreditation would be useful in this context. After maybe a couple of years in the retail industry, *Urmi* plans to train as a chef in a private hotel

management school. She would eventually like to help her father with the family owned small catering business. *Urmia* also mentioned that she had been tentatively planning to start a small business, for instance a restaurant, with maybe a couple of other ITI students a few years down the line provided that she managed to save enough for the working capital.

What is interesting to note here is the ability of the students to remain adaptable and flexible in face of the job uncertainties that they faced – an essential skill that ITI instructors repeatedly coached their students in. As one of the instructors shared with us:

“These are important issues for students to learn. Adaptability is very important. They should not be just thinking about one option. They will have to think about different options. If Cosmetology does not work they can move to customer relations in malls. That’s why we teach them employability skills. These skills are necessary in all sectors and they should be ready to move between sectors if necessary”.

The discourses of flexibility and adaptability are no doubt important for students to find employment opportunities in the short-run, however, they also fundamentally act to obfuscate the real instability of the current labour market in Kolkata with a very real problem of lack of long term secured employment opportunities for socio-economically marginalised youth populations. While flexibility and the ability to be ‘fleet-footed’ are qualities critical for ITI students to survive in an instable labour market, they do also highlight a crucial problem of skill training in Kolkata specifically and in India generally. Such a problem lies in the relative inability of students to productively hone and develop the skill sets they learn during the course of their training. As a result, years of intensive training and imbibing of skill sets might be dissipated under the continuous pressures to access whatever forms of job opportunities are available. While students are taught to learn the positive features of choice and options in the labour market, it is seldom mentioned that such choices are more often than not forced decisions that students have to take for economic reasons. As *Mita*, one of the graduates shared with us:

“You know ultimately what matters is me. If I am hard working, and I am open-minded about jobs, I will be able to survive”.

To extend the point made by *Mita*, what matters is survival; not the ability to develop the skills one has learnt in the course of the ITI. But the features of this desperate and often exhausting bid for survival in a predatory and precarious labour market in Kolkata is usually made palatable through the discourses of motivation, flexibility and adaptability that instructors pass onto students in order to craft them into docile but productive working bodies. This seems to be the essence of the “conduct of conduct” that Foucauldian governmentality bears out when theoretically applied to the skill training regimes of the current ITIs in Kolkata.

Conclusion

In this paper by drawing on Foucault's governmentality framework we examined how in the various ITIs in Kolkata, skill training has become the locus for creating particular kinds of flexible, adaptable and entrepreneurial subjects amongst underprivileged young female populations in order to integrate them with the demands of a rising service sector industry in the city. With the increased participation of young women especially from lower socio-economic backgrounds in urban service sector economy, vocational institutions like ITIs are compelled to extend training to women interested in retail, wellness, and other related forms of employment. Skill training is thus no longer restricted to imparting the kind of hard skills necessary for accessing industrial employment but extends to work on the dispositions of the students – by stoking their aspirations and motivations for more 'middle-class' fantasies of social success, without necessarily having the economic and social advantages that middle-classness actually posits. We identify these broader dispositional attributes of skill training as an emerging form of entrepreneurialism, where the student learns to manage her life as a form of enterprise, by taking risks, by remaining flexible and most importantly taking advantages of whatever (little) opportunities are present before her in terms of employment chances. Success or failure here is consequently completely individualised with very little possibilities of having any feeling of more class-based solidarities in surviving the labour market stresses.

An immediate consequence of such training would be the long-term de-politicisation of labour where students from a very young age internalise the virtues of individualism without being quite aware of the structural vices of labour market uncertainties under rapidly developing conditions of neoliberal privatisation in Kolkata's urban service sector. We also noted that in the ITIs the teachers had a key role to play in translating the discourses of governmentality to actual practical interventions both at the individual and collective level of students as potential workers. Through courses like 'Employability Skills', teachers would conduct various activities, presentations and practical training with the overarching aim of preparing students to be able to self-steer their lives and become responsible for their own success. Through "expert language" and "planned techniques", such skill training is no longer ~~remains~~ restricted to the economic and professional lives of the students, but in significant ways touches upon their personal lives, desires, hopes and fears (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 19). These are cultivated as more effective interventions for crafting the labouring bodies requisite for private capitalist growth in contemporary Kolkata.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council UK [grant number ES/S004297/1 and IIM-C grant RP: MA: AESESWCUK/3780/2018-19.

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1 For privacy and confidentiality, we have used pseudonyms for all interviewees and did not disclose the specific ITIs where research was conducted.

2 <https://dgt.gov.in/>.

3 According to the India Brand Equity Foundation (2018), in 2017–18, the contribution of the service sector to state GSVA was 57.15% compared to 19.83% by the industrial sector.