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Article

Pathways to Agricultural Skill Development in the Indian Himalayas

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Abstract

Policymakers and practitioners in the field of skill development often carry individualist and narrowly instrumental understandings of the reasons people enrol in their programmes. This article argues that people in the Global South seek to develop skills for a range of reasons, many of which are strongly influenced by their social environment and factors outside of their control. It presents the findings of a study involving surveys and semi-structured interviews with 53 trainees enrolled in agricultural skill development programmes in the state of Himachal Pradesh in the Indian Himalayas. Trainees' responses were analysed to determine common 'pathways' to agricultural skill development programmes. Seven major pathways were identified: supporting one's family; adopting commercial approaches to agriculture; managing a transition to agriculture after working in other sectors; gaining new knowledge; contributing to society; working from home; and developing a fallback option while seeking other work. These pathways were highly inflected by gender, age and caste. It is suggested that agricultural skill development practitioners will benefit from working with these pathways rather than assuming trainees carry more economistic motivations, but also from being critically aware of how the social factors that impinge on trainees' pathways are influenced by local power structures.

Keywords

Skill development, agricultural skills, gender, youth, aspirations, India

Introduction

Too often, policymakers focused on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in the Global South have neglected to consider why people

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should be interested in developing skills in the relatively non-remunerative and non-aspirational sectors towards which most TVET programmes are oriented. TVET's institutional mandate—particularly in the Global South—has often been defined narrowly in terms of increasing economic productivity. This tendency has been referred to as 'productivism', and by its measure, the 'success' of TVET programmes is indicated primarily in terms of outcomes for industry and economic growth (Anderson, 2009; Lewis, 2009). Factoring in other objectives, such as helping trainees' meet their own aspirations, is often seen as peripheral to this overarching objective. This neglect of trainees' perspectives is a problem, because if TVET programmes do not align with the interests, needs and aspirations of their target trainees, they can hardly hope to attract enough recruits to have their intended social and economic effects. Moreover, engaging with the reasons why trainees enrol makes it possible to reimagine TVET's social purpose: more than promoting economic growth, TVET as an institution is capable of enriching people's capacity to live meaningful lives and challenging entrenched inequalities. In this article, I join other scholars (e.g., Powell & McGrath, 2014a, 2019) in asserting that if TVET is to be leveraged for broad-based social transformation in the Global South, it must better engage with what trainees, their families and communities hope to achieve through skill development. I do this by examining why people in rural India are choosing to enrol in skill development programmes for one of the most non-remunerative and non-aspirational sectors—agriculture. Yet my ultimate contention is that it is not enough to simply factor people's reasons for enrolling into the design of TVET programmes: one must also critically reflect on how the reasons for enrolling are structured by power relations and seek to address the limitations that these relations impose.

The skill development programmes that are the focus of this article have been introduced under the aegis of the Agricultural Skills Council of India (ASCI). Since its formation in 2013, ASCI has sought to develop qualifications packs and model curricula for a suite of modularized training programmes for the agricultural sector. Their efforts form part of a broader reform of TVET in India, which has been underway since 2006. ASCI's efforts also reflect a broader trend across the Global South of incorporating agricultural training within formal TVET systems. This trend reflects growing recognition that agriculture and rural society are changing and new skills will be necessary to cope with a series of projected social, economic and environmental challenges.

In the exploratory stages of my research on ASCI's training programmes, the question of why trainees should want to enrol emerged as a central concern. Public officials tasked with administering programmes believed that, given that agriculture in the current policy environment is neither profitable nor invested with social status, it would be a challenge to find anyone interested in enrolling for training. Rural youth, they contended, would prefer to undertake vocational training related to information technology or mechanical work—skills that would lead to urban employment—and not agriculture, which they associated with poverty and backwardness. Older farmers, they believed, were already 'skilled' in the sense that they had 'hands on' experience working in agriculture—often since childhood—and hence would benefit more from short-duration courses focused on updating their

knowledge, rather than longer duration trainings focused on practical skills. They believed that, as such, the new agricultural TVET scheme would be plagued by chronic recruitment challenges.

Partly prompted by these concerns, I sought to develop a profile of the trainees who *have* enrolled in these agricultural skill development programmes and their reasons for doing so. In my analysis, I avoided a simplistic focus on 'trainee aspirations', recognizing that sometimes the reasons for enrolling in a training programme are outside of individuals' control. Instead I explored the 'pathways' into agricultural skill development programmes, through an analysis of responses to a survey and semi-structured interviews with 53 trainees enrolled in ASCI programmes in the state of Himachal Pradesh, in the Indian Himalayas. As explained in more detail below, I deploy the term 'pathways' to recognize both the internal and external factors that brought individual trainees to enrol for training. Attending to these pathways has the potential to inform a more trainee-centred approach to the design of training programmes, such that they can better help trainees to achieve outcomes that they desire. Yet I also reflect on how pathways are influenced by power structures related to gender, age, caste and other axes of social difference which must also be taken into consideration in the design of skill development programmes in the Global South.

Theorizing Pathways to Vocational Education in the Global South

Policymakers, scholars and practitioners of TVET in the Global South have carried limiting assumptions about its social purpose (McGrath, 2012). Too often, TVET has been represented as a site where high-school dropouts or those who have not found success in academic pursuits are prepared for entry into relatively technical (but often still poorly paid) working-class jobs. This comes despite evidence suggesting vocational trainees are diverse in terms of their educational qualifications (Barasa & Kaabwe, 2001). Scant attention has been directed towards the reasons why trainees come to vocational training and the aspirations they seek to fulfil through developing their skills. Generally, it has been assumed that trainees have a rather narrow objective of improving their employment prospects and gaining access to more remunerative wages.

Yet the few studies that have been conducted on the aspirations of trainees in vocational training centres suggest a far more diverse set of aspirations. Powell and McGrath (2014b), for example, found trainees in South African vocational training programmes are drawn to TVET for a range of reasons, not all of which can be reduced to the instrumental reason of 'getting a job'. For example, some of their research participants spoke of wanting to contribute to the development of their family or community, to gain self-employment and thereby escape the exploitative relations that characterize the private sector job market, or simply to break a bad habit—such as drug addiction or criminal activity—and gain self-respect and an improved self-image through mastering a skill. Similarly, Chea

and Huijsmans' (2017) study of informal apprenticeships in Cambodia found that apprentices, rather than straightforwardly seeking improvements in their livelihood prospects or income, often value the social relations formed in being introduced to a craft. Gooptu and Chakravarty's (2018) research on women entrepreneurs who have developed skills in home-cooking for food delivery businesses found women valued developing their skills because it allowed them to draw on family traditions to provide personalized service to customers and cultivate meaningful relationships with them. Interestingly, these women did not want to expand their business beyond a certain scale, as this would be at odds with these values, which are grounded in small-scale production for local markets.

Powell and McGrath (2019) argue that such aspirations can help to inform a more expansive concept of the purpose and potential of TVET. Drawing on the capabilities theories of Sen (1992) and Nussbaum (2011), they place human agency in a more central position, evaluating whether the development of skills helps people to live lives that they have reason to value. A TVET system informed by such a perspective would pay far greater attention to enhancing trainees' capacity for agency—that is, the substantive freedoms to choose between different possible life pathways (Powell & McGrath, 2014a). To that end, engaging with the reasons why trainees value particular skills and choose to come to training programmes and accordingly aligning programmes with trainee aspirations has the potential to enhance TVET's social function.

A focus on trainee aspirations, thus, can be valuable in unsettling the imagined purpose of TVET and initiating a shift towards more trainee-centred programmes that align with long-term life goals. Yet using aspirations as the interpretive lens for studying how trainees engage with programmes can be problematic. It implies a subject-driven locus of action that people attend vocational training based on factors that are more or less under their control. In the course of collecting data for the research presented in this article, however, it became apparent that the situation is more complex than can be captured through a focus on the kind of willed action implied by lifelong 'aspirations' or even more short-term 'motivations'. Participants expressed a range of factors that brought them to training, many of which were beyond their control. Often, if one could speak of 'aspirations', these aspirations were not exclusively formed by individual trainees, but were rather produced socially—reflecting the broader aspirations and expectations of family, community and society at large (see also Nambiar, 2013, p. 69). Thus, instead of aspirations, I attend to the diverse factors—which I describe as 'pathways'—that lead an individual to a vocational training programme. By pathways, I mean determinants both subjective and situational, both intended and contingent, that converge on enrolment. Whether subjectively or situationally driven, the pathways to agricultural vocational training programmes cannot be seen through an individualist lens—pathways are shaped socially and inflected by power. Thus, although attending to the desires that bring individuals to training programmes is an improvement over designing programmes only in relation to projected economic benefits, there is also a need to take a critical perspective on the environment that produces such desires and consider how training can empower trainees to overcome constraints imposed by that environment.

Such a perspective is consistent with a capabilities approach to skill development. Indeed, Sen (1992, pp. 6–7) states that one of the benefits of capabilities theory is that it recognizes that a focus on the realization of individual aspirations as a measure of a society's development is inadequate. Aspirations are often adjusted to an unjust environment. Instead, capabilities theory focuses on the 'functionings' people are actually capable of achieving—irrespective of whether they in fact choose to achieve them. To apply this in the case of skill development—if a skill development programme expands what trainees are objectively capable of achieving, they will have the ability to choose from a wider range of life pathways: their substantive freedoms would have increased (Sen, 1999). Under such circumstances, a programme can be seen as successful. Attending to the factors that inhibit the realization of a broad spectrum of functionings is thus critical. For example, it is not enough for a TVET programme to cultivate women's capacity to better perform domestic duties, simply on the basis that this is what women claim to aspire towards: programmes should, ideally, enhance one's sense of what is possible. Powell and McGrath (2019, pp. 8–9) acknowledge this, noting the importance of 'structure' as well as 'agency' in shaping individual choices and suggest a capabilities approach implies that TVET should attempt to overcome the constraining power of 'structure' and expand scope for 'agency'. Yet in order to achieve this, a theory of skills for human development must seek to understand those constraining structures and precisely how they can be addressed.

Previous social science research—mostly emanating from the Global North—suggests that existing TVET programmes often fail to overcome the constraining effects of structure: often, they reproduce these constraints. Colley et al. (2003) show that trainees enter vocational courses with social identities that predispose them towards acquiring certain types of skills—for example, working-class men may be predisposed towards mechanical work while working-class women may be disposed towards childcare. While vocational education could be a site for challenging these predispositions, often the opportunities for training that are presented to trainees and their interactions with the training system have the effect of reinforcing their prior conceptions of the skills they should aspire to acquire and discouraging the acquisition of skills that are discordant with their social identity. Other studies suggest that when trainees acquire skills that are normative for their social identity, they are more likely to receive praise and esteem from peers and trainers (Bates, 1991; Taylor, 2008). When TVET serves to limit one's conception of one's capabilities, it can be deeply disempowering—such as when trainees from poor backgrounds or marginalized communities are guided towards courses that offer limited prospects for upward mobility (Avis et al., 2017; Woronov, 2016).

Even when TVET does provide trainees with an expanded sense of what they can achieve, this is of little benefit if the wider social environment is not enabling. Patriarchal structures in the home, for example, can prevent women from realizing capabilities. Women may gain valued skills, yet still have limited scope to leverage them to access higher paid and higher status positions, because taking on these positions may be at odds with domestic obligations and locally salient notions of appropriate women's working hours (Carswell & De Neve, 2018). In India, caste networks are still the basis for labour recruitment in many sectors, implying that

simply gaining skills may not be sufficient to gain access to desired jobs if those skills do not align with one's traditional caste occupation (Sundar, 2018). When TVET graduates do access jobs, employers may constrain opportunities to make use of skills in desired ways. Many employers in India who take on recent TVET graduates as 'apprentices' only do so because this allows them to pay apprentice-level wages (often below minimum wage) and have no intention of putting them in positions in which they may utilize their skills or develop them further on the job (Ruthven, 2018). Unless training programmes provide trainees with competencies to challenge these limiting features of the social environment, they are unlikely to genuinely enhance capabilities in the absence of broader social and economic reform (Narayanan & Rao, 2019).

Pathways to Agricultural Vocational Training in the Global South

Theorizing pathways into *agricultural* vocational education in the Global South requires additional considerations. One reason for this is that agricultural livelihoods are generally not considered aspirational—and this is particularly true of young people. Research suggests that dispositions towards agricultural livelihoods may shift across the life course, with younger people being more reluctant to imagine agriculture as part of their futures (Okali & Sumberg, 2012). There are many reasons for this, including the (not unfounded) perception that it is difficult, if not impossible, to gain a decent income from farming and the physically demanding nature of the work. Other factors include the low social status awarded to agriculture and the lack of succession planning giving young people limited prospects of having decision-making power on their family farms (White, 2012). In India, lower caste youth may wish to escape the dominance of upper castes in the village and hence value the acquisition of non-agricultural skills that may enable urban employment—even when such employment is unlikely to lead to increased income (Carswell & De Neve, 2018). For all of these reasons, agriculture is often regarded as a livelihood option of last resort (Tadele & Gella, 2012), and developing agricultural skills is of lower priority than developing skills that may allow entry into other sectors (Robinson-Pant, 2016). In many cultural contexts, leaving the village in search of employment in the cities is regarded as a rite of passage—particularly for young men, for whom it may be associated with achieving socially valued constructions of 'success', 'modernity', 'adulthood' or 'manhood' (e.g., Monsutti, 2007; Osella & Osella, 2006). By implication, young people—particularly young men—who choose to pursue agricultural livelihoods may be positioned as 'failures', who have not managed to transition into urban livelihoods and lifestyles (Tadele & Gella, 2012).

Notwithstanding its low aspirational status, some youth—whether by choice or by uncontrollable personal circumstances—do continue to work in agriculture, including youth with college degrees. Such youth may contest social constructions of farming as a sign of 'failure' and invest significant value in their agricultural work. Mwaura's (2017) research on educated young farmers in Kenya reveals some of the ways in which those who (re)turn to agriculture after their studies maintain a sense of personal dignity and even elite status, despite the prevailing

social stigma surrounding agricultural labour. These young farmers distinguished themselves from educated unemployed youth—associated with images of ennui and hopelessness—by developing identities out of their diversified livelihood strategies as agents of personal and social change. Moreover, they distinguished themselves from other smallholding farmers, by emphasizing their entrepreneurial disposition and superior knowledge of new agricultural crops, technologies and techniques. Having advanced agricultural knowledge and skills was a source of distinction and self-esteem for young farmers.

A second reason why pathways to agricultural vocational training are unique is that despite its low economic returns, agriculture in the Global South often remains valued for its social and cultural functions. For this reason, in some cases, rural people in the Global South engage in forms of agricultural production even when they are not remunerative. Isakson's (2009) study of smallholding farmers in Guatemala, for example, found many smallholders engage in biodiverse subsistence agricultural practices—often alongside a suite of other livelihood activities—despite significant opportunity costs. They do so because subsistence agriculture is valued for providing nutritional security, bringing family together and generating cultural meaning. These cultural values ascribed to agriculture may partially explain why people continue to invest meaning in the development of agricultural skills, even when it may have been more profitable for them to develop skill sets for other sectors.

It must be added, however, that such acts of social and cultural reproduction can also reproduce inequalities and the suppression of capabilities. Agricultural labour is, for example, inscribed with highly gendered meanings, which may be implicated in the exploitation of female labour (Ramamurthy, 2010). In India, these meanings vary regionally. In zones in which commercial agriculture is well established—such as Punjab—the withdrawal of women from agricultural labour is considered a marker of a family's upward mobility and respectability, and agricultural skills are inscribed with virtues of virility (Bardhan, 1986). In more upland areas of India where agriculture is more subsistence-oriented, however, the development of women's agricultural skills is often culturally valued as a means of developing gender-normative identities: socializing women to be conscientious supporters of their families, for example (Dyson, 2010). Regional patriarchies also influence the kinds of agricultural activity men and women are guided towards. Women's limited access to capital, labour and land, combined with family expectations that they should be providers of food for the household, may make them less disposed towards developing aspirations for cash cropping; whereas expectations that men should be family 'breadwinners' may make them more disposed towards developing skills related to cash cropping (Okali & Sumberg, 2012). The caste and class connotations of particular agricultural tasks and skills also have significant effects on how they are socially valued—as markers of high or low status (Sundar, 2018).

While all of these meanings ascribed to agricultural skills are contested, they nonetheless strongly shape pathways to agricultural skill development programmes. This suggests that, even more so than is the case with TVET in other sectors, agricultural TVET programmes cannot assume that trainees are drawn to programmes simply on the basis of individualized career aspirations. Pathways to agricultural

TVET are strongly shaped by social factors. As the analysis presented below shows, it is important for programmes to both acknowledge and work with these social forces and values, while also acknowledging the ways in which they are implicated in the reproduction of inequalities.

India's New Agricultural Skill Development Scheme

The skill development programmes that form the focus of this article are a part of the government of India's agenda for vocational education reform. The need to improve India's vocational education sector has been a policy priority since 2004 (King, 2012), when it was recognized that future prospects for economic growth would be hampered if India did not have a suitably trained population of skilled workers (Mehrotra et al., 2014). The government has thus sought to increase the number of vocational education centres across the country, to improve the quality of training provided and ensure that the skills imparted match industry demand.

While these reforms were initially aimed at vocational education for the industrial and service sectors, agriculture was later grafted onto the agenda. In 2013, the ASCI was formed with the mandate of developing qualification packs and model curricula for the agricultural sector. These qualification packs would then be administered by a variety of partner organizations in the form of training programmes. Unlike in other sectors, the administering organizations would not be traditional institutions of vocational education, such as industrial training institutes or polytechnics. They were a more diverse group of organizations, both public and private, all of which had some experience or capacity to administer agricultural education. In the private sector, they consisted of for-profit organizations—including agri-business firms—and not-for-profit organizations, such as rural development NGOs. In the public sector, they consisted primarily of state-run institutions of agricultural extension—agricultural universities and Krishi Vigyan Kendras (Agricultural Science Centres, hereafter KVKs)—and it was at these public institutions that the research that informs this article was conducted.

Qualification packs and their associated training programmes are modularized such that they each focus on a specific activity within the agricultural sector. For example, there are separate qualification packs for different types of agricultural crops and care of different kinds of livestock. There are also qualification packs that relate to 'allied activities'—such as beekeeping and mushroom cultivation—and for a range of agricultural services. Qualification packs mandate a certain number of hours of training (generally between 200 and 350 hours per pack, translating to approximately four to six weeks of full-time training) and the number of hours to be imparted by theoretical and practical teaching modes. After completion of the training programme, trainees undergo an examination, conducted by a third party, to assess whether the appropriate knowledge and skills have been imparted. Participation in ASCI training programmes is free for trainees, though they may incur costs associated with transport, food and accommodation.

In publicly available documents, ASCI states that a part of its mission in developing qualification packs and overseeing the rollout of training programmes is to

foster economic growth and sustainability in the agricultural sector, to promote growth in rural employment opportunities and to encourage farmers to become more entrepreneurial.[1] Although it does not specify a particular target group for its interventions, some of the trainers and administrators interviewed for this research stated that they understood ASCI's training programmes to be oriented towards high-school dropouts and unemployed youth.

Regional Context and Methodology

The research that informs this article was conducted in Himachal Pradesh, a state in the mountainous Himalayan region of North India. Compared to other states of India, it has high per capita income and high indicators of human development (World Bank, 2018). This can be partly attributed to relatively effective governance and service delivery mechanisms and a relatively strong history of social movements demanding accountability from governments (Fischer, 2016). As of the 2011 Census of India, 90 per cent of Himachalis lived in rural areas. While the average landholdings are low compared to nearby states on the plains of India, sources of income are diversified, as many rural families find employment in local industries, such as tourism, and in neighbouring states.

Gender relations in Himachal Pradesh are structured by both patriarchy and local economic factors. As is the case elsewhere in the Himalayas, male outmigration is a prominent feature of rural Himachal—and one which is increasing in its prominence (John et al., 2008). Men migrate to other states to work for cash incomes, while women for the most part remain in villages and engage in agriculture, small-scale entrepreneurial activities and, in some cases, local wage labour. In upland areas, this outmigration is so pronounced that women often serve as de facto heads of household for much of the year (Berry, 2001). This, however, does not imply that women in Himachal Pradesh experience high levels of personal autonomy. As is the case across much of North India, rural Himachal observes patrilocal marriage customs in which women move to live with the family of their husbands after marriage (Bardhan, 1986). After marriage, women not only lose substantial social contacts with friend and family networks, but in many cases their labour also becomes subordinated to the service of their husband's family (Sharma, 1980). In this context, not only husbands, but also senior women in the husband's family—such as mothers-in-law and elder sisters-in-law—command significant authority over women newly married into the family (Berry, 2001).

The ASCI programmes on offer in Himachal Pradesh during the period that fieldwork was conducted mostly focused on small-scale agricultural entrepreneurship activities and, in some cases, off-farm employment in jobs related to agriculture. This was, perhaps, in recognition of the fact that, given the small size of average landholdings, ASCI's programmes that focus on agricultural machinery or staple crop production may not have been useful in supporting local livelihoods. The courses on offer across the state in late 2018 and early 2019 were beekeeper, dairy entrepreneur, extension service provider, gardener, medicinal

plant cultivator, mushroom grower, nursery grower, organic grower, quality seed grower and small poultry farmer.

Fifty-three trainees from four of these training programmes were enlisted to participate in the study. Trainees were recruited to participate at the training site. There were no particular sampling criteria used, although an effort was made to ensure the sample was approximately reflective of the gender and age profile of those enrolled in the training. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with trainees, which asked, amongst other things, questions related to their current livelihood activities (and that of their families), their reasons for enrolling in the training programme, their plans (both after completing training and longer term) and their views on the value of the training. After this, they were asked to complete a short survey, which asked questions related to their basic demographic characteristics, including age, gender, highest level of education, land holdings and caste. Survey responses were used to compile basic descriptive statistics on trainee characteristics, which are presented below.

Responses to interview questions provided a basis for determining the key factors that led to participants enrolling for agricultural training. These responses were later coded and common 'pathways' to the training programme determined by way of inductive content analysis. Each participant's responses could be coded into more than one pathway, which was necessary given that trainees' responses often suggested multiple reasons for enrolling. An initial 19 pathways were identified. After coding all participants' responses, this set of pathways was reviewed. In some cases, it was found that narrowly defined pathways could be considered sub-categories of broader pathways and so were combined. Pathways only identified in the context of one training programme were eliminated, since they could not be generalized. After these eliminations, 10 pathways remained, which are shown in Table 1, though for the sake of brevity, only the top seven pathways are discussed in this article. Each pathway was analysed in terms of the demographic characteristics of those to whom it applied, particularly on the basis of age, gender and caste.

Results: Trainee Characteristics and Their Pathways to Training

Of the 53 trainees who participated in the study, 64 per cent were male and 36 per cent were female. This was notwithstanding the fact that in Himachal Pradesh, women undertake most of the agricultural labour. In terms of caste, 4 per cent were from Scheduled Tribes (ST), 8 per cent Scheduled Caste (SC), 36 per cent Other Backward Caste (OBC) and 53 per cent General caste.[2] There were substantial differences in the caste and gender profiles of trainees from one training programme to another. This may be attributed to (a) bias amongst trainers in their trainee recruitment strategies (training programmes led by male trainers had drastically lower numbers of female trainees, for example); (b) regional variation within Himachal Pradesh in terms of the involvement of women and various caste groups in agricultural production; and (c) the focus of the training programmes, some of

Table 1. Frequency of Indicating a Particular Pathway to Training, Disaggregated by Caste, Gender and Age

	Caste				Gender		Age				
Pathway to Agricultural Training	G	OBC	SC	ST	M	F	18–34	35–44	45+	Totals (No.)	Totals (%)
Supporting family	11	9	1	0	10	11	9	10	2	21	40
Adopting more commercial approach	10	7	2	0	15	4	4	10	5	19	36
Returning to agriculture after time in other sectors	12	4	2	0	17	1	7	9	2	18	34
Learning something new	10	4	1	1	13	3	3	6	7	16	30
Contributing to society	8	2	2	0	8	4	5	5	2	12	23
Working from home	2	5	0	0	1	6	3	4	0	7	13
Fallback option while seeking other work	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	1	0	4	8
Love of animals/concern for animal welfare	3	0	0	0	2	1	2	1	0	3	6
Starting a side business for supplementary income	2	0	1	0	1	2	2	1	0	3	6
Desire for a more natural/ spiritual lifestyle	2	1	0	0	3	0	1	2	0	3	6

Source: The author.

which may have had greater appeal to different groups. The training programme on mushroom cultivation, for example, attracted a much higher number of female trainees.

The age of participants in the study sample ranged from 21 to 69 years, with a mean age of 36.6. Female participants were on average younger, with a mean age of 34.7 years, compared to 37.6 years for male participants. Moreover, the age range of female participants was considerably narrower—23 to 48 years, compared to 21 to 69 years for men. All female participants were married and all except one had children—which was not the case for men.

Participants had all completed primary school, but beyond that their educational attainments were varied. Eight per cent had not completed 10th class; 28 per cent had completed either 10th or 11th class; a further 28 per cent had completed 12th class; 6 per cent had post-secondary vocational qualifications (diplomas); 19 per cent had undergraduate degrees; and 11 per cent had postgraduate degrees.

Land holdings of participants ranged from 0 to 11.25 acres, with an average of two acres. Only three participants had landholdings above 5 acres and only one participant recorded having no land. The middle 50 per cent of participants had between 0.7 and 2.8 acres of land. The difference between participants in terms of landholdings was, therefore, not substantial, and broadly reflective of the distribution of landholdings in the districts of Himachal in which the research was conducted. Those from General caste backgrounds had slightly higher than average landholdings at 2.8 acres. It is noteworthy, however, that given the highly diversified livelihoods in Himachal Pradesh and the varying quality of land in mountainous versus plains districts, the size of landholdings may not accurately reflect participants' socio-economic status.

As discussed above, content analysis of data provided in interviews determined the major pathways to agricultural skill development programmes. Differences in the characteristics of trainees who followed each of these pathways in terms of age, caste and gender are summarized in Table 1. The top seven pathways are described below, listed in descending order of the number of trainees to whom they were applicable.

Supporting Family

The need or desire to support one's family was the most commonly expressed factor that motivated participants to enrol for agricultural training. Forty per cent of trainees expressed this as a factor, including people of all ages and both men and women. The nature of family obligations and the manner in which they were articulated, however, were strongly inflected by gender and age, and a much higher proportion of women mentioned family considerations as a driving factor for their enrolment than men. The men who did express a concern for their family were mostly older men with children. These men expressed their desire to help their families in terms of either setting a positive example to their children—demonstrating the merit of hard work—or developing a profitable business so that their children (usually sons) would have an employment option later in life if

they were unable to find other work. Some older women listed similar factors as influencing their enrolment.

For younger women, coming to a training programme was more closely related to the dynamics of the marital home. As noted earlier, for women in North India, significant conformity is often expected to elder figures in their husband's family. Hence, it was telling that almost all the younger women who attended training—and especially those who had recently married—suggested that a major factor that brought them was that either their mother-in-law, elder sister-in-law, father-in-law or husband had either sent them or encouraged them to attend. They spoke of the value of acquiring new skills in terms of making a contribution to the marital household—either in labour to existing household livelihood activities or in starting a new venture to generate an additional stream of income. In some cases, this was also linked to anxiety about being idle within the marital home.

At first glance, such findings appear to suggest that young women's attendance was informed by a lack of personal autonomy. Yet matters were not always so simple. In at least three instances, there were clear signs of young women drawing on the resources the training programme provided to engage in what Kandiyoti (1988) calls 'bargaining with patriarchy'—that is, deploying strategies to gain some room for autonomy in a context marked by patriarchal constraints. Three young women participants who had indicated that they intended to use the skills they had acquired in the programme to support their family also articulated plans to use their newly acquired skills to gain certain concessions in their marital home. The first of these women was otherwise engaged in her husband's textiles business and agricultural work with her mother-in-law. She hoped that learning new skills would allow her to start her own agricultural venture which, although contributing to family income, would be conducted independently of her husband or mother-in-law, giving her an activity and source of cash income over which she would be sovereign. The second of these women had previously been a schoolteacher but was asked to give up her job after marriage to support her husband's family. She hoped that she could use the skills she was learning to help her father-in-law establish a more successful agricultural business, which might allow her the opportunity to return to paid work. The third of these women hoped to use her skills to support not only her marital home but also her natal home—specifically to help her impoverished mother start a business of her own. Thus, in some cases, supporting the marital home through agricultural skill development and negotiating spaces for autonomous action within it were closely intertwined.

Adopting a More Commercial Approach to Farming

The second most common pathway to training was an intention to practise agriculture on a more commercial basis than they or their communities had previously. Often, this intention emerged from the recognition of a market opportunity—having seen demand emerge for certain agricultural products, or rising consumer concern about the quality or safety of food products. In other cases, participants had identified a government scheme or subsidy that would make it more viable to engage with

agriculture on a commercial scale than would have otherwise been the case. From the training programme, they hoped to gain what might be considered 'entrepreneurship skills' (though none used the term 'entrepreneurship' in interviews). Specifically, trainees spoke of wanting to learn how to upscale operations, make better utilization of land, improve access to markets (including through online and direct marketing strategies), access loans, value addition and labour management.

Participants with such commercial intentions did not dramatically differ from others in terms of their caste or the size of their landholdings. There were, however, significantly more men in this category, and their average age was greater than that of other participants. Moreover, older participants were more likely to exhibit awareness of market opportunities and the entrepreneurship skills they needed for success. Men over the age of 35—including those with limited prior involvement in agriculture—often spoke in very specific terms of commercial opportunities and government schemes to capitalize upon. They often had realistic estimates of the scale at which they hoped to work, while younger men occasionally expressed more grandiose plans. Some older men seemed aware that their knowledge of commercial opportunities distinguished them from other farmers in their locality.

These observations suggest that the intention to develop commercial agriculture or entrepreneurship skills is contingent on having the social connections necessary to become aware of opportunities and on a degree of knowledge of how agricultural markets work. In Himachal, men are more likely to possess the former, as they are more directly involved in market transactions, while the latter develops with age and experience. This, again, speaks to the patriarchal context in which trainees operate—constraints on female autonomy and, to a lesser extent, on that of younger men, significantly impede opportunities to become aware of the economic value of entrepreneurship.

Managing a (Re)turn to Agriculture

A large subset of participants—some 34 per cent—were in a common life situation: they were either turning to agriculture for the first time or returning to agriculture after time spent working in other sectors. All but one of these participants were men. Some had been living outside their home village for some time, either for work or for study, and recently returned, while others had been living in the village while doing work in another field—usually some form of semi-skilled labour. The reasons for leaving their previous work and turning to agriculture were varied. For some, it related to factors outside of their control—a workplace injury or a family member becoming sick and requiring greater attention, for example. For others, it was a deliberate choice. Many described feeling dissatisfied with the hard work and low pay in their previous jobs. Those who had been living in cities outside of their home villages spoke of living in unpleasant accommodation, the challenges of managing their affairs independently, the emotional burden of separation from family members, high living costs and poor work conditions as reasons for wanting to return.

Since these participants had either limited prior experience in agriculture or had not been involved in agriculture for some time, training helped them manage the transition. For some, training also served as a basis for social distinction. Given the low status awarded to agriculture across much of India, return migrants can be subject to ridicule within villages—their return to agriculture is seen as a sign of having 'failed' in other pursuits. Even if such ridicule does not occur, return migrants may suffer from negative self-perceptions as having 'failed' (Brown et al., 2017). For participants in the present study, undertaking training to start a venture in a more specialized domain in agriculture provided a basis to alleviate this stigma and distinguish themselves from other farmers in the village. For example, it was quite common for participants in this 'pathway' to indicate that where others in the village were just doing what their ancestors had always done, they were in training to learn how to farm 'scientifically'. Several participants in this category—particularly younger men—also directly stated a long-term desire to be recognized as successful farmers by others in their region, either for their agricultural technique or for success in rural enterprise. For example, one young man who had recently returned from a period of work as a salesman in Dubai said that in time he hoped to be recognized as the most successful dairy farmer in Himachal. Some also noted that the skills that they had gained through working in other sectors—or through undertaking higher education—would be assets for them in starting new agricultural ventures, particularly in providing them with greater business acumen. This seemed to act as an additional marker of distinction for them.

These findings parallel those of other studies on the heightened dispositions towards entrepreneurship exhibited by return migrants relative to those who remain in the village (e.g., Démurger & Xu, 2011). They also speak to issues of power. They reflect men's (particularly young men's) need to maintain self-respect in a context in which migration and the generation of cash income are central to local constructions of masculinity. They also reflect how those with relative privilege—those with the resources and networks to have migrated or found work in other sectors—were able to leverage the resources they gained through their work outside agriculture to reproduce or enhance their status within the village—even when their initial life plans had gone awry. While further research is needed on the impact of such individuals on their communities, at face value, it seems contradictory. By deploying skills gained elsewhere within the village, they are agents of economic transformation—yet their motivations to preserve status suggest they may also potentially wedge social and economic inequalities.

Learning Something New

Several trainees expressed a desire to gain new knowledge or learn how to do something new as a key factor that brought them to training. In most cases, this was for instrumental reasons. Some expressed a desire to better understand problems they had encountered in their agricultural work—particularly those involved in animal husbandry, who came to training with concerns about maintaining animal health. Others hoped to learn about a new agricultural activity that might allow

them to diversify their sources of income. Six participants were concerned that the unscientific approaches that they and their family had adopted hitherto were possibly compromising their yields, income or the health and wellbeing of their animals. One participant noted that gaining new knowledge is the best way for smallholding farmers to improve their income, since other investments would require large amounts of capital, which they did not possess. A smaller number of participants expressed less instrumental motivations for wanting to acquire new knowledge, stating that they were simply curious and had the spare time to attend. Others expressed beliefs in the innate value of knowledge or being knowledgeable.

One might expect such motivations to inspire a farmer to attend a more traditional agricultural extension programme rather than a more intensive and longer-term vocational training. It was thus noteworthy that, on average, participants who listed the desire to learn new things as a pathway to training were relatively privileged compared to others: they were 81 per cent male, more likely to be from higher castes, and were older than other participants. Several made note of having spare time that enabled them to attend training. Given the unequal burden of agricultural labour on women in Himachal and their host of other domestic obligations, it is perhaps not surprising that more women did not attend on the basis of their curiosity to learn new things—they would need more tangible outcomes from training to justify taking out so much time. Men's ability to attend training for this reason was a by-product of either a relatively high level of economic security or their capacity to rely on other family members—notably women—to maintain daily agricultural tasks during their absence.

Contributing to Wider Society

Participants not only expressed desires to use agricultural skills to support their families, some also wanted to make use of them to uplift their wider community. For 23 per cent of participants, this was a major factor that motivated them to participate in training. Some intended to support their community in informal ways—in leading by example or being a figure whom other farmers could approach for advice. One elder—and already quite successful—farmer indicated that he hoped to provide non-formal learning opportunities for young people in his area, drawing partly on the skills he had gained in the training programme. For nine of the participants, however, there was a clearly expressed intention to help uplift their communities by working through formal associations.

While the participants who expressed these intentions were diverse on almost all indices (gender, caste, landholdings and education level), there were remarkable caste differences between trainees in terms of the kinds of organizations they hoped to work with. Participants from SC or OBC backgrounds wanted to work through organizations dedicated to economic upliftment, including self-help groups, farmers' cooperatives, women's collectives, or rural development NGOs. Most of these individuals were already involved with such organizations and hoped to find ways of working together with other farmers for mutual benefit. Four out of the five participants from General caste backgrounds who wished to work with formal organizations, however, hoped to promote what they had

learnt through organizations affiliated with right-wing Hindu nationalist politics. Their intentions were, in most cases, not exclusively related to uplifting their communities economically, but also reflected more cultural considerations. Trainees studying organic farming, for example, hoped to promote more 'natural' lifestyles in their villages that, they believed, were more concordant with Hindu values. The organizations with which they hoped to work are implicated in forms of exclusionary nationalism, the naturalization of caste and gender hierarchies, and the suppression of lower caste political assertion. Thus, while the desire to make a social contribution through agricultural skill development cuts across multiple axes of social difference, the way in which one imagines 'society' and how to make a 'contribution' varies according to one's caste position and, in some cases, may serve to advance the interests of one's own caste to the exclusion of others.

Working from Home

Related to the need to support family was a desire to engage in work that could be done from home. This response was given by seven participants and emerged exclusively in the mushroom cultivation and animal husbandry courses, both of which can be done without venturing far from the household. Again, responses were highly gendered. Women respondents spoke of being 'free at home' (*ham ghar pe free rahte hain*) and hence wanting to engage in some kind of productive activity. The expression connoted a degree of idleness and boredom. It is noteworthy that the women in this category had often recently had a change in their circumstances. For relatively young women, either they had recently married or their children had recently started school, or for older women, children had recently left the family home or had become more independent. There was a desire (or family pressure) to engage in some remunerative activity but, given domestic responsibilities and the fact that women's mobility outside of the domestic sphere is often restricted in North India, being able to work from home was preferable. The contrast to pathway 4, above, is striking: While men's idleness allowed them the luxury to follow their curiosity, women's led to a vexing need to fill their time more appropriately.

Only one man expressed a desire to work from home as part of his reasons for enrolling in the training programme and his circumstances were quite different. He had recently returned to Himachal after an unsatisfying career in the corporate sector in a nearby city. He wanted to start an agricultural venture with his family so that he could spend more time with them. 'I am working towards inner peace', he said. 'Getting back to a place where I belong to.' His response showed a greater degree of volition, whereas women's desires to work from home were more often an adaptation to externally applied constraints.

Source of Livelihood While Searching for Other Work

Research elsewhere in the world has shown that in the context of widespread educated youth unemployment, young people with college degrees may take an

interest in starting businesses in agriculture as a means of making a living while looking for other kinds of work (Mwaura, 2017). Only four of the participants in this research, however, articulated that they had come to training with this in mind. Two of these participants were male, two were female, and all aged under 40. They all had post-secondary qualifications—two with postgraduate, one with undergraduate and one with vocational qualifications. One of these youth specifically described herself as 'educated unemployed' (*padhi-likhi berozgaar*). They were actively seeking work—often government employment—but knew the job market to be challenging. Although one of these four indicated a desire to maintain a side business in animal husbandry even if he was successful in his search for employment, the others' commitment to starting an agricultural venture seemed provisional. One suggested, for example, that she would start a business in animal husbandry, but when she gained entry into her preferred career (teaching), she would leave the business to others in her family. For one young man, agricultural work was less appealing—he was simply acquiring some skills that may be useful in the future, in case his plan to gain employment as a stonemason was not successful.

Given the wider literature on youth in agriculture in the Global South, which suggests that agriculture often serves as a 'fallback option' for youth aspiring to other career pathways (Mwaura, 2017; Okali & Sumberg, 2012), it is, perhaps, surprising that there were so few who came to training via this pathway. This may be because youth who do not see agriculture as part of their longer-term futures are unlikely to see value in attending training programmes, particularly the longer duration programmes offered under ASCI.

Discussion and Conclusion

Conventional research and policymaking surrounding TVET tends to assume that people enrol in training programmes as rational individuals for narrowly instrumental reasons. India's new agricultural skill development scheme carries similar assumptions regarding the instrumental factors guiding trainees to enrol—namely, that they do so to improve yields and income. The findings of this research, however, suggest a more complicated range of pathways that lead individuals to agricultural training. While it is true that many were hoping to enhance their entrepreneurial capacity, this was listed among a range of other factors.

The findings suggest three main points regarding trainee pathways. First, they are not always structured by individual, subjective factors. People come to training as a result of a convergence of factors, some of which may be internal (passion, curiosity and ambition), but many of which are externally imposed by the social, economic and ecological environment (weak job markets, family circumstances, changes in local ecology and infrastructure). Second, pathways did not converge around desires to increase productivity or income. The factors that brought people to training were diverse and included desires for social distinction, inclusion, recognition and the welfare of communities—in addition to improving one's earning capacity. Third, pathways were highly inflected by categories of social difference—gender in particular. This was reflected in the larger number of women

who indicated family considerations and a desire to work from home as part of their pathways to training, while men were more likely to express interest in developing commercial opportunities or manage a transition to agriculture after time spent in other sectors. Age was also a relevant factor, with youth being more likely to express needs for social distinction or to develop an agricultural livelihood as a backup plan if other career goals were unsuccessful.

Taken collectively, the findings suggest that practitioners, policymakers and scholars interested in agricultural skill development cannot rest on individualist or economistic assumptions regarding the purpose of training. Contrary to popular perceptions, rural citizens do not only view agriculture as an employment option of last resort, pursued only for a lack of other alternatives. Despite the significant hardship endured by those working in the agrarian sector, both agriculture and agricultural skills are valued for a wide variety of reasons. Agriculture is a means of supporting and remaining close to one's family and friends. Through it, one can play important roles in their community. For some, it is seen as an untapped area for commercial innovation—and hence forms of livelihood that may be more attractive than wage labour in urban centres. To be *skilled* in agriculture not only imparts economic benefits, but can also be a way of distinguishing oneself from others or crafting a unique identity, and hence can be a source of self-respect and social esteem. Through gaining agricultural skills, one can improve one's capabilities to act autonomously, independent of one's family.

Factoring in these pathways has the potential to enrich training programmes. If, as trainers suggest, there has been a lack of interest in rural communities in attending ASCI programmes, this is perhaps because they have not appealed more to rural people's collectivist dispositions and desires for social recognition. Programmes could be pitched, for example, more in terms of how they can provide support for families or how agricultural skills can act as sources of social prestige.

Yet there is a need for critical reflection before looking to pathways as a guide to programme structure and promotion. Precisely because they are structured by the social, economic and institutional context, pathways reflect power relations. In particular, the findings above show how patriarchy structured trainees' pathways in ways that may be antithetical to the enhancement of capabilities. While women's pathways were more often structured by domestic responsibilities imposed by family, men's reflected their exposure to market opportunities, their experience as migrants and their capacity to rely on (mostly female) family labour at home to maintain the farm while they undertake training. Similarly, the intentions of some higher caste trainees to promote what they have learnt through Hindu nationalist organizations suggested that it is possible that skill development can feed into socially exclusionary projects. Yet the research also provided glimpses into how these power relations might be subverted: for example, when women found opportunities to draw on their skills to expand spaces of autonomy at home, even while conforming to the expectations of contributing to the welfare of their families. This suggests that rather than simply working with women's desires to support their families, trainers might find entry points to challenge the normativity of the patriarchal order. For example, programmes could develop an explicit agenda to use agricultural skills as a way of creating spaces for autonomy for women by

encouraging agricultural entrepreneurship efforts independent of family members. To this end, it may also be beneficial to use more participatory programme designs that facilitate critical reflection on the social and institutional barriers to making use of skills and how to develop individual and collective strategies to overcome them (see Narayanan & Rao, 2019). Moreover, as Trauger et al. (2008) suggest, agricultural training programmes should focus on developing skills that one does *not* get the chance to develop at home (which could be due to gender-, caste-, class- or age-based exclusions), rather than only focus on the skills that local power structures encourage trainees to seek out.

One reason for caution regarding these findings is that the pathways discussed here may reflect systemic exclusions. For example, one might expect that farmers experiencing high levels of economic precarity may have been more likely to express the need for livelihood security as part of their 'pathway' to training—but such farmers may have lacked the time, resources, social status or social connections necessary to access training programmes. It is also highly likely that some trainers exhibited bias in the selection of candidates to participate in training, as was reflected in the uneven caste and gender distribution between programmes. This may indicate that there were potential 'pathways' to training amongst less fortunate rural citizens that are not reflected here. Nonetheless, the general conclusion remains: TVET programmes in the Global South should be more informed by (a) what trainees actually want; (b) analysis of how what trainees want is influenced by forms of social power that enable or constrain what they are objectively capable of achieving; and (c) a determination to address the social factors that constrain capabilities.

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Notes

1. See http://www.asci-india.com/vission%20&%20mission.php
2. These terms are the official nomenclature of the government of India in relation to caste. SCs refer to those who had historically faced the stigma of untouchability or other forms of social exclusion. STs belong to tribal communities who, while not 'castes', in some case face similar discrimination to SCs. OBCs are those who, while not suffering from the severe social exclusions of SCs and STs, nonetheless, have been determined to suffer from social and economic deprivation. The 'General' category refers those belonging to communities considered of higher status than OBCs.

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