

Impoverished Youth and Informal Vocational Training in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

India's rapid economic growth has not generated enough stable jobs in its formal sectors. Therefore, youth from an impoverished background often participate and learn in the informal sectors. This study reveals the experience of youth living in impoverished areas of Delhi, working at a furniture workshop, by focusing on their future aspirations. This study conducted intensive fieldwork in August 2025 to capture the circumstances of young people working in such furniture-making workshops. Such workshops in Delhi act as an informal vocational learning space where poor youth acquire practical furniture-making skills and cultivate concrete future aspirations, leveraging networks for high-wage overseas labor migration and upward social mobility through the strategic purchase of luxury goods.

Keywords: Informal Learning, Furniture Workshops, Aspiration, Impoverished Youth, India

1. INTRODUCTION

This study revealed the experience of youth living in economically-backward areas of Delhi, who worked at a furniture workshop, by focusing on their future aspirations. To capture the relationship between Vocational Education and Training (VET) and youth poverty, it was important to understand the workplace as a means of gaining work-related skills and knowledge, and cultivating aspirations. This study defined youth as people aged 15–29 years, per the youth survey by the Government of India (GoI, 2022), and examined the relationship between impoverished youth and informal vocational training in contemporary India.

India has a huge youth population, comprising 27.2% of the total population (GoI, 2022). It is common for them to attend schools in urban and rural areas, which has increased the gross enrolment rate of higher education, reaching approximately 27% (GoI, 2022). Although they envisage a future with employment opportunities in the formal sector, they are struggling to achieve this vision (Chaya, 2024; Jakimow, 2016) due to insufficient employment opportunities. India's rapid economic growth has failed to create sufficient employment opportunities in the formal sector, leading to jobless growth. Consequently, the youth unemployment rate reached 12.9% (2020-21) (GoI, 2022).

The higher the educational level, the higher the unemployment rate, reaching 12.4% for those with postgraduate degrees or above and 13% for graduates. However, the unemployment rate for those who completed higher secondary education was 4.4%, lower secondary education was 1.9%, and primary education was 0.6% (GoI, 2024). In other words, it is difficult to obtain employment in the formal sector even if they complete higher education. Hence, the youth survive in uncertain situations (Mankekar & Gupta, 2025). However, not all youth receive higher education; some may face uncertainty. The gross enrolment rate of higher secondary education was 53.8% (2020-21), and several young people completed or dropped out of secondary education to enter the workforce. They begin work in the informal sector, without stable wages or social security.

India institutionalized vocational education and training after independence. Students follow a single academic track until primary education. In lower secondary education, they are exposed to work education through a pre-vocational course. On passing the exam at the end of lower secondary education, they can choose between the academic or vocational track (Gupta et al., 2016). However, vocational courses are recognized as appropriate for students with poor academic performance. Consequently, 86.1% of the youth did not have any vocational education and training across India (GoI, 2022).

The Government of India initiated two programs in the mid-2000s. First, "Vocationalisation of Secondary Education." This initiative, led by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, targeted students enrolled in formal education. It created opportunities for skills education at the secondary education level, enhancing individual employability. The second was the "Skill Development Mission," which focused on developing vocational training programs to enhance employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas and the informal sector, alongside reforms in the Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs).

Furthermore, the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, who made employment a key manifesto pledge, formulated the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (NPSDE) in 2015 to promote vocational education. Moreover, the National Education Policy of 2020 emphasized the integration of vocational training in mainstream schooling by 2025 to eliminate prejudice against vocational training and ensure that at least 50% of the students receive such training. These reforms led to an observable increase in students participating in vocational training, particularly through school education. Nevertheless, for young people living in impoverished areas, the research sites of this study, especially males, the predominant method of acquiring skills and knowledge after school remained working at nearby establishments, such as motorcycle repair shops, tailors, training gyms, or furniture workshops, within their local environment.

Why is vocational education undervalued in India? According to Singh (2001), during British colonial rule, the government implemented vocational training in industrial sectors, such as railways and shipbuilding. However, it was primarily targeted at European residents in India due to the prejudice held by British entrepreneurs and employers that Indian people were unreliable and lacked stamina. While Indians were encouraged to acquire craft-related skills, such as carpentry, upper-caste Hindus receiving education at the time preferred clerical work over manual labor.

Consequently, vocational education for Indians was neglected. This neglect persisted after independence in 1947. The Indian government's estimates of demand for various skills within its human resource development plans were primarily based on the future needs of the formal economy and geared toward employment in high-tech industries. It has been noted that workers in the informal sector acquired diverse capabilities through informal vocational learning in the workplace, family, and community (Singh, 2001). Moreover, vocational education remained socially undervalued compared to general education (Jambo & Pilz, 2018; Sodhi & Wessels, 2016). Singh (2001) stated that through this informal vocational training, young people acquired job-specific technical skills and general skills, such as cognitive abilities, temperament, and character, alongside social competencies, such as interpersonal relationships and mutual trust.

Furthermore, research examining young people engaged in tailoring in India revealed that, through informal vocational learning, they possessed a broad range of tailoring skills and the ability to economically manage their businesses (Regel & Pilz, 2019). Thus, examining the relationship between contemporary Indian youth and vocational education and training requires attention to institutionalized forms and informal vocational learning. However, such research, by focusing excessively on the skills required for occupations and business operations, overlooks the extent to which informal occupational learning spaces function as venues where young people cultivate their aspirations through work experience. This is despite the fact that the capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004) has become critically important for contemporary Indian youth (Branagan, 2020; Zabaliūtė, 2016).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study conducted intensive fieldwork in August 2025 to capture the circumstances of young people working in furniture workshops. Data concerning the impoverished regions surveyed were obtained through fieldwork conducted intermittently from the 2010s to the 2020s. Furthermore, data were collected from the research participants after explaining the research content, and acquiring permission for publication. To protect personal information, the names of the individuals have been pseudonymized.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Desire to Acquire Skills and Work Abroad

The furniture workshop is located on the pavement surrounding a lush green park in a middle-class residential area in northeast Delhi, India. The approximately 3-metre-wide, brick-paved pavement is often occupied by light motor vehicles and Sports Utility Vehicles belonging to local residents. However, within a roughly 10-metre-wide vacant space, one finds beds and chairs in various stages of production, plastic containers filled with wood glue, corded electric circular saws, and scattered pieces of timber. This is the workspace of the furniture workshop central to this study.

The workshop's office and storage are located on the ground floor of an apartment block across a busy road from the workspace on the pavement. The owner is a man in his 50s, born in Uttar Pradesh. He came to Delhi around the age of 14 years and began working in furniture making. He acquired the required skills and eventually established his own shop. All the staff, including him, were Muslim. The workshop is closed on Tuesdays and holidays. On other days, the staff work from 9 am to 9 pm. They return home at 2 pm for a lunch break of about an hour and a half. Upon returning, they resume work, which is largely completed by around 8 pm. Hereafter, they display furniture on the street to engage passing customers.

The workspace is broadly divided into two areas: one for furniture construction and the other for sanding and varnishing the finished pieces. The physically demanding tasks of furniture making—lifting timber, using electric saws, and assembling with hammers—are handled by young men in their 20s and 30s. Sanding and varnishing are undertaken by staff aged 60 years and above. The most experienced furniture-making staff member is Salman (28 years old). He has 12 years of experience, including time spent working in Saudi Arabia. His experience is closely followed by two staff members with 6–7 years of experience (one of whom is a slum resident and the other is Nadim's older brother), Nadim (17 years) with 4 years of experience, and Samir (21 years), who joined the workshop three months ago. While the two mid-level staff lead the workshop, Salman creates a template for the curved decorative sections of bed frames. The other staff members use electric circular saws to cut out identical shapes. Nadim and Samir cut boards for the base and sides, apply wood glue to the legs, and nail the boards to the legs.

Samir, the newcomer, had worked in an electrical appliance factory and a jacket workshop after completing higher secondary education at a government school. However, he had no experience in furniture making. Nadim, who lived in the same apartment block, introduced him to this job. Samir, at the time of the study, was handling tasks, such as cutting boards for bed frames with an electric circular saw and nailing boards to bed legs. However, the difference in experience was clear. For instance, Samir would strike a hammer 17–20 times to drive in a single nail, whereas Nadim could hammer it in firmly in just 7–9 strikes. Furthermore, when cutting the legs to the same length, Salman took charge, while Samir held the legs steady. Hence, the work process in the workshop is learned by observing colleagues.

Author: If you could learn furniture-making skills at ITI or college, why did you start working straight away?

Samir: The first reason is that you have to pay to go to college or ITI. But here, you get paid. The second reason is that college takes two or three years to learn the skills, whereas here you can learn them in a year or so.

Hence, Samir found employment through a referral from a neighbor already working there. He received no formal training, learning the skills on the job. His choice to forego institutionalized vocational training stemmed from opting for on-job learning, that is, acquiring skills while earning money, rather than paying for time-consuming vocational courses. For such impoverished youth, working in a furniture workshop offered a concrete vision for the future: overseas labor migration.

Salman is from Uttar Pradesh. After working for six years in a furniture factory in Delhi, he worked abroad in Saudi Arabia for five years. He returned to India upon marriage and now works at this furniture workshop. According to the owner, many young people go to work in the Middle East. Nadim's older brother, currently the second most experienced worker, plans to go to Saudi Arabia within a year. Preparation is necessary for overseas work, starting with obtaining a passport. Samir was already in the

process of getting his passport. He learned about the procedure while working at the workshop. The owner explained that when planning to go overseas to work, an agent can handle all the necessary paperwork for a payment of INR 1 lakh. Samir stated, "After working here for five years, I'll have the skills needed to work overseas," shaping his vision for overseas work.

This ability to envision such a future stems from Salman's presence, who has overseas work experience, the owner, who has sent young people abroad, the agent introduced by the owner, and Nadim's older brother as a role model, who plans to go to Saudi Arabia next year. Thus, the furniture workshop served as a place where impoverished youth acquired skills to earn substantial money and obtain information about the arrangements and fees for going overseas, nurturing concrete aspirations for the future.

3.2 Skills for Dealing with Government Agencies and Aspirations for Upward Mobility

Around 5:30 pm on August 4, 2025, while I was talking with the owner, a vehicle marked "Delhi Police" stopped in front of the workspace. The owner approached the male police officer and spoke with him for a minute or two. Rumors started circulating among the young furniture makers that "the Committee might be coming." Nadim and Samir explained the details.

Author: Does "Committee" mean the police?

Samir: No, it's the Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

Author: Do they come often?

Samir: Once or twice a week. They stop us from working. They say we can't work on the street.

Author: But how did you know the Committee was coming?

Nadim: The police tell us. That's why the owner pays the police about INR 1000-2000 every month.

Although Nadim and Samir continued working, the owner instructed the other staff to "tidy up." The staff moved unfinished beds from the street into the office. Samir swept the sidewalk with a broom. Sawdust, wood chips, and used paper cups were swept away. However, there was no sign of the Committee.

At 7 pm, the streetlights came on. Samir wrapped several cords with attached lamps around the trees and streetlight poles in the workspace, illuminating the sidewalk. Seeing no sign of the Committee, the owner instructed the staff to display the finished furniture. The owner and I joined the staff in bringing out the furniture. One double bed, one dining table, four dining chairs, two low chairs, and one coffee table were placed on the sidewalk. Once Nadim and Samir finished displaying the furniture, they resumed working on the bed frame. The owner got on his motorcycle and rode off.

Around 7:30 pm, an elderly man running a street stall on the same sidewalk spotted a car far down the road and shouted, "It's the Committee!" Hearing this, four staff members and I hurriedly moved the displayed furniture into the office and packed up everything. However, the Committee headed in a different direction and never came near the workshop. Shortly after, the owner returned. Seeing the furniture gone, he enquired from Samir if the Committee came and who informed them. Samir pointed to the street vendor. Realizing that things were under control, he instructed the staff to rearrange the furniture.

Hence, the young people were practically learning how to deal with administrative authorities that significantly impact the workshop's operations, including the necessity of bribing. Protecting the workshop and maintaining its profitability brings economic benefits to the young staff. This fosters hope of becoming economically "successful individuals."

Nadim, born in Delhi, dropped out in sixth grade at a government-run elementary school. He worked at a different furniture workshop but quit after a fight with the owner. He joined his current workshop in 2021 and earns a monthly salary of INR 17,000. This is a good wage compared to the INR 5,000-10,000 per month earned at motorcycle repair shops or tailors. Nadim saved his income and bought an iPhone 13 for INR 49,000 three months ago. He proudly proclaimed that he was the only one among his friends with an iPhone. He owned a used motorcycle worth INR 50,000 as well. He showed

me a video on his new iPhone of a black Mahindra Scorpio car (about INR 170,000), claiming that he plans to save money to buy this car and drive it back to his family's village in Uttar Pradesh.

Nadeem: I'm admired back home. I have an iPhone and I can afford a bike. I work hard in Delhi, and once I buy a car, I think my parents will be really happy.

Avoiding administrative penalties and preserving his job at the furniture workshop allowed him to maintain a higher income than other informal sector jobs. This enabled the purchase of luxury items, and built the aspiration to buy a car. Hence, through luxury goods, young people from impoverished backgrounds position themselves within a higher social stratum in their minds. Therefore, the furniture workshop became a place that nurtured this hope for upward mobility.

4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

For young people living in impoverished areas of Delhi, a local furniture workshop serves as a practical learning environment where they acquire furniture-making skills and the administrative skills to run a business. This reveals that such skills, as highlighted in previous research (Gupta et al., 2016; Regel & Pilz, 2019), foster hope among impoverished youth for overseas labor migration and social advancement. Furthermore, furniture workshops serve as spaces where they can cultivate concrete aspirations within the highly uncertain informal sector, which has limited formal employment opportunities. These hopes are fostered through networks involving young people with overseas labor experience, workshop owners, agents supporting overseas labor, and young people purchasing luxury goods. These networks constitute a crucial space for nurturing hope within contemporary India, characterized by high uncertainty (Mankekar & Gupta, 2025).

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