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‘The Sun Always Rises’: Caste, Predatory Development and the Struggle for Self-Worth in India's Araku Valley

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‘THE SUN ALWAYS RISES’:

CASTE, PREDATORY DEVELOPMENT AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF-WORTH IN INDIA’S ARAKU VALLEY

Vivekananda Nemana

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates why and how development becomes predatory in India's poorest places – and what marginalized people do when it is their own development under threat. Drawing on 4 years of ethnographic fieldwork and over 40 interviews conducted in India's Araku Valley between 2012 and 2023, I analyze institutional arrangements that appear to offer pathways to social inclusion for marginalized groups but ultimately reproduce and entrench systemic inequalities. I theorize the concept of "predatory development" to describe these arrangements, referring to social arrangements that aim to include marginalized people in development initiatives, while ensuring these initiatives do not fundamentally disrupt the existing social order through perverse institutional designs.

In Araku Valley, the expansion of universal education was enthusiastically embraced by historically excluded Adivasi communities, who viewed formal schooling as the key to overcoming social disadvantage. Despite this engagement, significant employment opportunities remained inaccessible to them, highlighting a core logic of predatory development where maintaining entrenched social structures, like caste, overrides inclusive goals.

I argue that the extension of education in Araku Valley, rather than serving as a pathway to empowerment, becomes entangled with enduring caste structures and neoliberal economic policies, resulting in a 'glass door' phenomenon that channels Adivasi aspirations into precarious forms of labor and limited social recognition.

This dissertation further investigates how the cultural meanings of education are shaped and contested in the context of predatory development, highlighting the ways in which Adivasi youth deploy education not only as a means of economic advancement but also as a tool for reclaiming dignity, agency, and self-worth.

Sociologically, this research contributes by: 1) Theorizing "predatory development" as a mechanism functioning through caste hierarchies in India, analogous to predatory inclusion via racial hierarchies in other contexts. 2) Demonstrating ethnographically how caste, as a system dividing laborers and controlling knowledge, shapes the devaluation of educational credentials for lower-caste groups even amidst universal access. 3) Highlighting the complex interplay of caste, development, and agency, showing how Adivasi youth navigate and challenge predatory systems by strategically using education to contest ontological categories, redefine social identities, and pursue alternative pathways to dignity and self-determination.

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This dissertation is the result of a research project that began as a journalistic curiosity 13 years ago and evolved into something far more over time. It would not have been possible if not for the kindness, genius, and compassion of an enormous number of people for whom I am eternally grateful. Sociology teaches us again and again how so much of life's privileges depend on the strength of one's social ties. In that way I have been truly blessed.

I'd like to begin by thanking my wonderful friends in Araku Valley for taking me in and showing me their world. Venkata Rao and his kind family gave a permanent home in the Valley and treated me like their own family member. Kondababu – rest his soul – was a steady source of warmth and wisdom. Thanks to Prem, Purni, Usha, Esu, Anil, Ramesh, Laxmi and so many others for allowing me to tell their stories. They have been my greatest teachers.

I extend my deepest thanks to my colleagues at the Princeton Department of Sociology for their inspiring perspectives, intellectual stimulation and unwavering support throughout this entire process. I am immensely grateful to my chair Fred Wherry and reader Janet Vertesi for their keen insights and guidance as I struggled to articulate my thoughts. My sincere thanks to Miguel Centeno, Sanyu Mojola, Rajesh Veeraraghavan and other brilliant faculty members for their timely and insightful comments on multiple drafts over the years. The Center for Global India (especially Anu Ramaswami and Rachna Kalra) and the Center for International Security Studies were crucial sources of support, funding and amity on campus. My fellow graduate students, and the members of my cohort especially, deserve my deepest gratitude for constant fellowship and inspiration. A special thanks to my students at the Princeton Startup Immersion Program, who accompanied me to India and taught me at least as much as I have taught them.

Beyond my colleagues, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to my family. To my parents,

Padma and Satya, thank you for your unwavering love, endless encouragement, and the sacrifices you have made to support my academic pursuits. Your belief in me has been a constant source of strength. My many kin in India provided me with love, care and a warm bed to sleep in throughout my travels through India. A very, very special acknowledge goes to my sister Samatha Nemana and my best friend Parth Shah. Writing a dissertation can impose immense mental challenges, and they were both at my side to ensure I saw this project through. Parth worked with me to make sure I would not get in my own way, an exercise in immense patience. Samatha is the greatest sibling I could have ever hoped for, lovingly reading through even the messiest of drafts, providing critical edits and comments throughout, and sitting with me in the final days to ensure completion. The both of them were the friends I turned to whenever I doubted my ability to finish the task. I could never have done any of this without them. I only hope others are so lucky as to have such people on their side.

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Introduction
Predatory Development

> "There is little doubt that primary education among the masses has been very much neglected… Nearly nine-tenths of the villages in this Presidency, or nearly [one million] children, it is said, are without any provision, whatever, for primary instruction. A good deal of their poverty, their want of self-reliance, their entire dependence upon the learned and intelligent classes, is attributable to this deplorable state of education among the peasantry."
>
> *– Deposition by Indian social reformer Jyotirao Phule to the Indian Education Commission, 1881*
>
> *****
>
> "What the new generation does like is money. According to a survey conducted by Coca-Cola, the primary ambition of young Indians from the smallest villages to the largest cities is to "become rich." Young people hope to achieve this goal through enterprise and education."
>
> *– From a Businessweek cover story titled "India's Youth," October 1999*

The 2016 *Girijan Yuvathi Upadhi Samithi,* or Conference on the Limitations Facing Tribal Youth, highlighted a distressing paradox: Tribal children in Andhra Pradesh were finally attending school, but failing to climb out of poverty. Despite the promise of education as a tool for social inclusion, tribal youth had yet to reap its ultimate reward: stable, full-time employment with reliable salaries. In other words, a decent job. That simple criteria, they knew, still provided enough security to release a tribal family from the clutches of extreme poverty, perhaps for good. Yet good, formal economy jobs were only available in the public sector or at large corporations, which never hired tribal people from the hills anyway. The only other options were either farm labor or under-the-table work for one of the small enterprises that comprise India's vast informal economy – precisely the sort of unregulated, underpaid work that many young tribals had hoped to transcend with a college education.

In many ways, the rapid proliferation of education even in this remote and underdeveloped region had exemplified the historic significance of India's recent push for free and universal education (Ayyar 2016). But would it all amount to only sound and fury, signifying nothing? At

the conference, participants gathered in an aging public meetinghouse to reflect on the broken promises of the schools and colleges that had opened across the Araku Valley over the past decade. Most of these new institutions were publicly funded and free, making universal education a reality for central India's *Adivasis*, or Scheduled Tribes. With over 110 million people belonging to one of the 704 recognized tribal communities, India's indigenous population is larger than that of Brahmins, Patels, Sikhs and Jains combined. Few social groups in India are as numerous and diverse as its Adivasi communities, yet Adivasis on the whole are by most indicators the poorest and most disenfranchised social category in all of India. Centuries of social, economic and educational exclusion have left them with widespread illiteracy, high mortality rates and near-total dependence on subsistence agriculture.

The emergence of a generation of tribal children in Andhra Pradesh who routinely completed high school marked a dramatic shift from this history of exclusion and neglect. For the first time, Adivasi children from some of India's poorest regions were spending their days among textbooks and classrooms, taking it for granted that they belonged in school as young students would anywhere else. Tens of thousands of these first generation students – virtually all of them the children of sustenance farmers living below the poverty line – had studied even further to obtain professional qualifications for white collar careers in teaching and healthcare.

Yet, as conference members noted, the push for an inclusive education system had not resulted in genuine social mobility for Scheduled Tribes. Few tribal graduates, even those with advanced degrees, found stable employment, let alone jobs relevant to their studies. Many were stuck in an indefinite search for their first career-launching position, while scraping by in the meantime on "temporary" roles in the country's vast informal economy. Government jobs, in theory required to reserve affirmative action quotas for disadvantaged castes, were often sold to

the highest bidder instead. Sometimes public sector listings would spend months evaluating candidates and then never materialize at all. Meanwhile, the private sector discriminated against rural and lower-caste candidates, and the inadequate education in tribal schools left students woefully underprepared. There was plenty of private sector demand for labor in the country's booming service economy – say, for delivery drivers, beauticians or cleaners. But these were invariably precarious jobs that, in the words of one Araku graduate named Prem, left you with "no savings, no chance of going anywhere. All they give you is something to eat and somewhere to sleep." It was possible, as Prem experienced, to complete more than 16 years of schooling – to have four or five times as much education as one's parents, if not more – and still feel treated as worthless by the outside world.

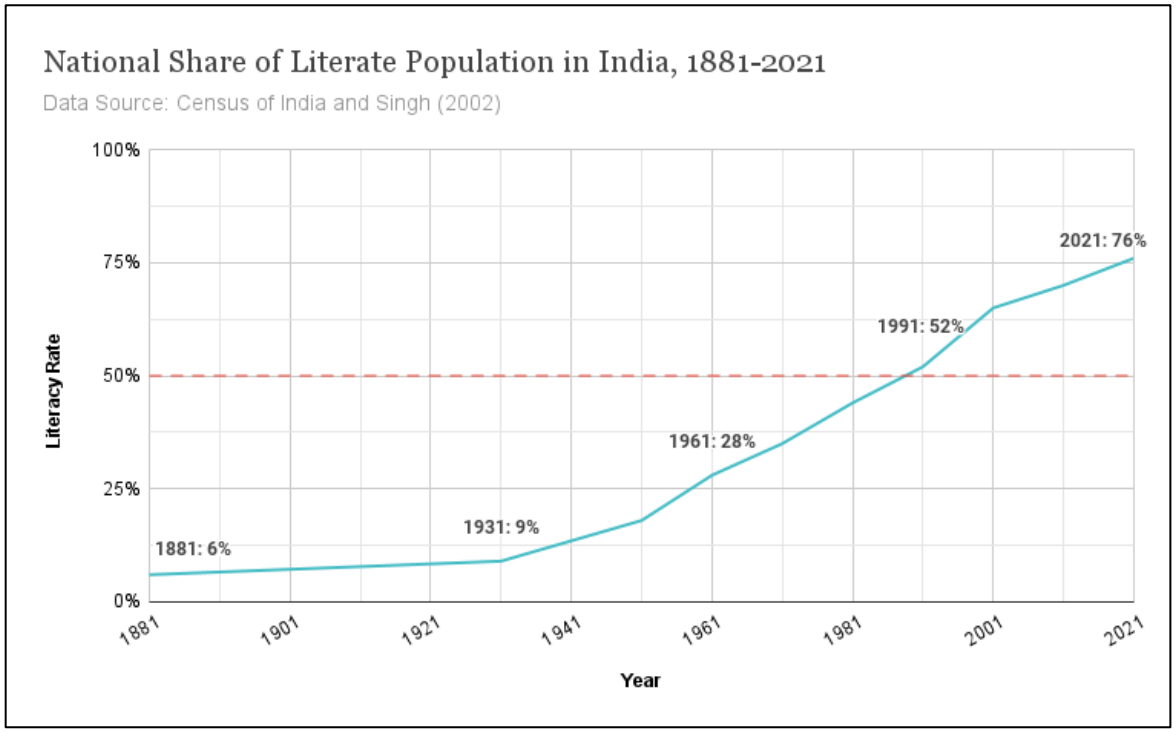


Fig. 1: Historic literacy levels measured by the Census of India reveal the staggering extent of illiteracy in modern India: more than half the population could not read or write until 1991, and nearly 1 in 4 (mostly the aging poor) cannot do so even today. By contrast, over 96% of Americans were literate by 1931 (Source: Singh 2002; Census of India 2011).

Education has long been seen as a main path to social mobility and emancipation in India. However, despite many efforts to provide education to marginalized communities, the results have often been disappointing. This gap between access to education and real social uplift is clearly visible among India's tribal communities, especially in the Araku Valley of Andhra Pradesh. Here, the spread of education has not led to the expected social mobility. Instead, it has resulted in what I call *predatory development*—a process where institutions meant to uplift marginalized groups actually entrench their disadvantages.

At the *Girijana Samathi*, conference participants struggled with a growing sense that something was going terribly wrong within India's processes of national economic development, which are as central and instrumental to India's shared national identity as the American Dream is for the United States. It used to be that underdevelopment among India's Scheduled Tribes was explicable through their lack of access to basic modern amenities and services like education, infrastructure and healthcare. That was still a problem, but now, "There are 650,000 Girijans[1] in Visakhapatnam, but not even six of our people in America," observed Murthy, a local teacher, comparing the situation to Guntur, a wealthy district in the Krishna River delta. "Every village in Guntur has someone abroad. What we need is social consciousness. It's happening slowly, as this generation keeps failing their exams and realizes what it means to spend years in school only to gain nothing."

The concept of predatory development encapsulates this phenomenon. It refers to a form of development that appears to offer opportunities for social and economic advancement but ultimately reinforces existing inequalities. In the case of tribal education, predatory development manifests in the form of educational institutions that fail to result in meaningful opportunities for

[1] The terms Schedule Tribe, tribes, 'Girijan' and Adivasi are all used interchangeably.

social upliftment, leaving students with qualifications that are devalued in the job market. The inclusion of marginalized castes in education, therefore, is made possible only through their continued exclusion from the very benefits education is said to deliver in a modern, democratic society.



Fig. 2: Murthy speaking at the Girijan Yuvathi Upadhi Samathi in Araku Valley (2016).

Murthy's comparison is telling. While both tribal farmers in Araku Valley and upper-caste landowners in Guntur are categorized as rural populations, the latter successfully leveraged their caste networks and access to quality education to send their children abroad for lucrative IT careers. Guntur and Krishna districts exemplify the "Andhra" model of development: rural areas that embraced neoliberal growth, fueled by foreign investment and high-skilled migration. Upper-caste Brahmin, Kamma and Reddy youth studied engineering rigorously and migrated *en masse* to Western countries, particularly the U.S. The money they sent back home helped

develop Hyderabad into a modern 'Silicon' city, offering well-paid jobs to engineering graduates who stayed in India. This created a new upper-caste, ‘New Indian’ lifestyle tied to globalization, where academic success was often cited as the sole path to prosperity, overlooking the importance of wealth and caste connections. Failures were blamed on “education failure,” rather than the larger failure of the neoliberal model to provide jobs for all.

To the educated and employed tribal activists and teachers at the conference, this was evidence of a darker conspiracy to deny development to their people. No matter how hard they tried, tribal youth could not replicate the apparent education-driven success of their coastal Andhra peers. Their lack of English skills, among other disadvantages, marked them as unfit for formal private sector roles, even though only recent generations of coastal Andhra students spoke English fluently. The perceived poor quality of their education, both real and imagined, meant they were never seen as legitimate candidates for success in the new economy, despite being far more educated than their parents.

Study Background

India’s Youth Employment Crisis

In the past two decades alone, India successfully attained its developmental holy grail of universal primary education. The 2009 Right to Education Act made schooling mandatory and free for all children under the age of 15; over 99% of all elementary-aged India children now complete their primary schooling. Enrollment levels in more advanced levels of the Indian education system have accordingly shot up as well. The gross enrollment ratio for secondary education rose from 45% in 2001 to 78% in 2021; the GER for higher education more than tripled from 9% to 31% (World Bank 2022). Nearly 40% of all Indians aged 15-34 years

identified as a full time student in 2021, while less than 15% had done so as recently as 2007 (Kumar 2017; Kumar 2021). This dramatic nationwide expansion of education coincided with India's becoming one of the fastest growing economies in the world, averaging 6.7% in annual GDP growth over the past two decades (World Bank 2025).

But many of the country's 600 million youth face economic purgatory as they struggle to find decent work in the modern economy. Intriguingly, education levels have continued to expand in recent years despite sky rocketing youth unemployment rates. Stranger still: unemployment rates in India are significantly worse among *more* educated cohorts. More than 40% of college graduates under the age of 25 are unemployed, compared with 11% of those in the same age group who haven't completed primary school (Agarwal and Li 2024). Unemployment has correlated with education in India for decades by now, yet this trend continues to stump researchers and policy experts.

Unemployed or Unskilled?

While few observers would dispute the dismal state of India's labor markets, intense public disagreement surrounds the underlying causes of this situation and its potential solutions. On the one hand, political and business elites in India, including most members of Parliament and outspoken human resource executives, have pinned the blame squarely on the inadequate skills of Indian workers, arguing that Indian workers are simply too unemployable to be hired for modern jobs, even though abundant opportunities exist. According to this view, not only is India's crippling "skills shortage" responsible for persistent youth unemployment, but the poorly trained and badly educated workforce makes it impossible for businesses to hire the talented employees they need to expand operations, jeopardizing national economic growth in turn (e.g.

Modi 2015; Bellman and Range 2008; Pant 2017). This argument was influential enough with Indian government officials and corporate executives to mobilize the passage of ambitious national skill development policies in 2009 and 2015. With aggressive mandates to train, certify and set occupational standards for as many as 500 million Indian workers in the "practical skills" they were said to lack, the generously-funded policies enshrined an official view of "skills" as the main variable separating mass unemployment in India from widespread job creation, productivity gains and sustained economic growth (MSDE 2015).

Yet the near-unanimous elite support for skills development belies important unresolved differences over how "skills" were defined and "unskilled" workers identified; more importantly, there was the glaring fact that that the young, "unskilled" workers in question were, in fact, the most educated Indian generation to date. The moral panic over skills in India coincided with the achievement of universal primary school completion, near-universal literacy and a dramatic rise in university enrollment (Brookings 2019). Indians under 30 today are the chief beneficiaries of major strides in the average length of schooling, as well as its overall inclusivity among women and students from historically-disadvantaged castes, many of whom were the first members of their families to graduate high school or college. And yet, paradoxically, acquiring more education actually *increased* within-group chances of unemployment.

In recent years, student groups have increasingly taken to the streets to demand "employment with dignity," and protest the government's failure to ensure adequate job creation, especially for holders of advanced degrees. Proponents of this view blame the *jobless growth* of the Indian economy, especially in coveted professions like IT, for placing such extreme pressures on labor markets that open positions for government jobs routinely attract millions of applicants, and even advanced graduates often resort to menial gig work or migrant labor in order to make ends meet

(Jeffrey 2010; Saraf 2016; Maithreyi et al. 2017). In the words of one unemployed graduate, "After studying so much, we can't start driving rickshaws or selling ice cream. The government has to create the right kinds of jobs for those with graduate degrees" (Agarwal and Li 2024).

Cultural Meanings of Ability, Work and Worth in India

When nations industrialized in the past, their traditional agrarian workforces would be gradually absorbed by an expanding manufacturing sector; the modern notion of the "standard" 9-to-5 job owes as much to the historic feasibility of large, industrial labor forces as to landmark socio-political events such as labor movements and public investment in universal education. The classic Lewis model of macroeconomic growth holds that, since the Industrial Revolution, nations develop into modern economic powerhouses by transitioning their agrarian economies towards large-scale industrial manufacturing (Lewis 1954; Amirapu and Subramanian 2015). In the 21st century, however, the highly efficient nature of automation and global trade has compelled developing countries like India to forego large manufacturing bases in favor of high-tech service economies that generate rapid growth but fewer full-time jobs (Rodrik 2016).

Talk of "skills" or "employment with dignity" is inevitably laden with cultural meanings and value judgements about specific forms of employment that are or are not attainable for Indian workers. But whereas caste stigmas are deeply inflected in the status of various informal sector roles, which are often explicitly caste-based occupations like farming or carpentry, similar roles in the gig economy may or may not have the same association. By analyzing shared understandings in how workers, employers and state officials discuss notions of good jobs, dignity, skills or employability, then, it becomes possible to excavate emergent hierarchies of

occupational status and moral order attached to work in a context of profound social change, in which "work" lacks any clear definition at all.

This dissertation is about why and how development becomes predatory in India's poorest places – and what marginalized people can do once they realize that specific institutional arrangements they believed would help improve their lives, or 'develop' into new social realities, actually end up rearticulating the very conditions of their marginalization. By "predatory," I refer to a deliberate process that justifies the continued marginalization of disadvantaged groups through perverse institutional arrangements. Predatory development is not just a failure of implementation or a byproduct of poor policy. These arrangements are designed to include marginalized people in development initiatives while simultaneously ensuring that these initiatives do not disrupt the existing social order.

In the context of Indian education, predatory development is particularly insidious. The expansion of education in tribal areas was intended to integrate these communities into mainstream Indian society and improve their economic well-being. However, the institutional mechanisms put in place—ranging from poor-quality schools to discriminatory hiring practices—have ensured that Indian youth from disadvantaged castes remain at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. The education system, rather than serving as a ladder for upward mobility, has become a trap, reinforcing the very inequalities it was meant to dismantle by steering aspirational and upwardly-mobile lower-caste graduates back towards lower-class jobs.

Theorizing Predatory Development

The transformative social effects of a fully literate, highly-educated Adivasi generation rising suddenly from a place that has only known subsistence farming cannot be overstated. But as

expressed by the *Girijan Yuvathi Upadhi Samathi* speakers, very few of these educated Adivasi youth successfully find desirable jobs as government or corporate employees – that is, formal sector jobs with guaranteed salaries and employee protections. Complicating this story further, a large section of lower caste Indian youth are actively opting out of jobs that *are* available to them in the neoliberal Indian economy – precarious gig work, low wage jobs in the service economy or global supply chains – choosing instead to wait it out at home and keep trying for a full-time professional role.

A surprising number of these young job seekers choose to be unemployed over taking work that Murthy disparaged as "drivers, servants and guards for the rich." Why do unemployed but educated young people in Araku and elsewhere not take the economic opportunities in reach, as rational economic theory would suggest? Why do they still keep faith in a system that has seemingly failed them? After following young Adivasi respondents in Araku Valley throughout adolescence and adulthood, my primary takeaway is that education has helped enfranchise a generation of lower caste Indian youth with a deep sense of self-worth and a new set of cultural strategies to detect and avoid exploitation. In valuing the future promise of dignity over economic returns in the present, their actions point to a seismic reorganization of caste and developmental relations in modern capitalist India. This thesis is about what it means for these youth to wait, to opt out of full-time employment while finding suitable means to preserve their sense of worth and contribution to their community.

While Indian policy elites often cast tribal people as unruly and resistant to development efforts in their own interest, tribal people in the Valley constantly expressed the pressing need *for* development – both casually and in organized forums like the *Girijan Yuvathi Upadhi Samathi*. Instead, as I observed over 4 non-consecutive years of regular field visits between 2012 and

2023, the fear of left-wing insurgencies had finally convinced Indian officials to increase public investment and policy-making in tribal areas, resulting in what may have been the single largest commitment of public funds for tribal development in the history of the Valley. 'Development' alternated between state-mediated forms that could be a) welcome and beneficial or b) another front for profit-driven exploitation which they had to resist. More pernicious were the arrangements I call c) *predatory development*, or forms of development that appeared desirable and even essential for social inclusion at first, only to manifest as mechanisms to further entrench their marginalization at the bottom of India's socio-economic hierarchy.

I should first clarify that the term 'predatory development' borrows from the "predatory inclusion" concept that developed in the racial capitalism literature; it is not a reference to certain works of critical development scholarship that describe international development as a Western-centric and inherently unequal process (e.g. see Ferguson 1994, Escobar 1995). Rather, I argue that what distinguishes some developmental efforts as predatory is that their adverse outcomes are experienced as deception, confusion and betrayal by their victims. Like the proverbial abusive spouse, predatory development starts off as a highly desirable and necessary intervention embraced by even the most skeptical recipients, who realize only too late that that the clear goals and promises are never going to be realized.

In this way, predatory development is conceptually similar to Lauren Bernant's concept of "cruel optimism" (Bernant 2011). As Bernant defines it, cruel optimism describes a situation where an individual or group remains attached to an object or system that actively hinders their ability to achieve the desired outcome. This attachment persists even when the object of desire, which could be a relationship, an ideology or a societal structure, demonstrably undermines the individual's or group's well-being. The cruelty of this relationship comes from the fact that even

as the desired object prevents fulfilment of the initial aim, individuals remain attached to it despite the harm it causes. The American Dream idea that anyone can attain success through hard work and determination, Bernant suggests, is an illustration of cruel optimism because people remain invested in the American Dream even when the American system is structured to prevent their success.

As with cruel optimism, people in predatory development situations remain attached to the initial aims of development even as the development apparatus eventually renders them impossible to achieve. Unlike Bernant, however, I do not view attachment as the source of further harm. Indeed, as we will see, it is this very attachment that ultimately helps to limit predatory development in the end. To develop this idea further, I now theorize both "predatory" and "development" in turn.

Theorizing 'Predatory'

Recent works on racial capitalism identify mechanisms of financial and education inclusion that exacerbate the very conditions they are meant to help. In all these cases, projects meant to better incorporate marginalized people into social and economic life achieve the opposite effect, ending up in the context of American racism as mechanisms that further entrench social inequalities. The main explanatory mechanism they identify is how racial hierarchies penetrate seemingly objective market mechanisms like the setting of prices and the evaluation of risks, rigging the game from the outset.

McMillan Cottom (2017) identifies *Lower Ed* as a process of credential expansion resulting in a higher-risk tier of schools "organized to commodify social inequalities and make no social contributions beyond the assumed indirect effect of greater individual human capital." Lower Ed

appears to belong in the same category as more prestigious, non-profit higher education institutions – but it is explicitly driven by profits, targeting students excluded from mainstream higher education with hollow promises of upward mobility that play off the "Education Gospel," while saddling them with high tuition fees and predatory forms of student debt. Perversely, then, Lower Ed worsens the very social inequities that educational expansion is meant to address.

Taking a page from Cottom, Seamster and Charron-Chénier (2017) explain disproportionately high Black student debt levels by offering the following definition for *predatory inclusion* (which inspired my coinage of predatory development), which nicely summarizes the main mechanism of interest across the studies:

> "Predatory inclusion refers to a process whereby members of a marginalized group are provided with access to a good, service, or opportunity from which they have historically been excluded but under conditions that jeopardize the benefits of this access. Indeed, processes of predatory inclusion are often presented as providing marginalized individuals with opportunities for social and economic progress. In the long term, however, predatory inclusion reproduces marginalization for these groups while allowing already-dominant social actors to derive significant profits." (p. 2)

Predatory inclusion mechanisms are social processes that appear transformative while ultimately reproducing more of the same. The racial capitalism literature offers powerful analytical tools to explain how predatory inclusion occurs at micro- and meso-levels. Taylor's study of the extension of homeownership to African Americans (2019) theorizes *predatory inclusion* as the exploitative practices in urban housing market transactions enabled by credit inclusion policies that ignored the larger dynamics created by racial residential segregation. First, Black borrowers were forced towards distressed and overvalued urban housing stock because of their exclusion from white suburbs. Racist valuations of Black-owned homes led to "maniacal reactions" from White neighbors on the basis of protecting their property value. The historic poverty of Black neighborhoods, meanwhile, were articulated by the mortgage industry as risk, forcing Black buyers of distressed homes into higher interest rates, fees, and fines.

When Black buyers owing higher rates for poorer quality housing defaulted under the multiplicity of financial burdens, it became proof of Black borrowers' moral unfitness, further legitimizing the racist valuations that kept them out of suburbs and raised their fees in the first place. Taylor identifies encoded racism in various credit industry practices as the mechanisms driving predatory inclusion, which passed for neutral and objective accounting that nonetheless ensured entrenched racial hierarchies while generating high profits for lenders: "The dictates of the market have been impossible to surmount when housing is a commodity and thus malleable to the social desires and expectations of a public molded by racial consciousness."

In a similar vein, Robinson (2020) argues that taken-for-granted market rules and expectations encode racial bias and rationalize the exclusion of people believed unfit for market participation. With Whiteness seen as creditworthy and Blackness seen as not, Black people's inability to participate in markets in "sustained and favorable ways cements their status at the bottom of the economic hierarchy and as uncreditworthy." Robinson compares the divergent fortunes of two differentially administered credit expansion policies to highlight the *constitutive whiteness of credit*: Federal Insuring Offices angered White people because they sold credit expansion to minorities as relaxing market rules for riskier buyers, whereas Housing Finance Agencies subverted market rules by framing credit expansion in terms of speculative finance and suburban prosperity. Hence, he argues, race constitutes credit and markets through the enforcement of taken-for-granted market expectations.

Wherry et al. (2019) propose that "financial citizenship" depends on people's rights to respect, belong to or be recognized among others in order to fully participate in economic markets. Unfortunately, policymakers and others still conceive of credit as a hard, mathematical utility unfettered by social meanings: "Behaviors that did not conform to the imagined (white)

middle-class template needed to be corrected so that families of color could enjoy the same opportunities as their white counterparts. Such correction would enable brown folks to leave the "backwardness" of their informal practices and institutions and mimic those of modernity" (ibid., p. 61).

The literature on racial capitalism helps illuminate the predatory development concept in several ways. First, predatory inclusion helps theorize what we mean by predatory by calling attention to the "conditions that jeopardize the benefits of access" (Seamster and Charron-Chénier 2017). Next, the specific conditions, in the racial capitalism literature, are almost always hidden variables of race, encoded into market rules or mathematical accounting tools that appear neutral and objective – and are in any case difficult in practice to call out as racist and unfair. Wherry et al. (2019) and Robinson (2020) identify the racial attitudes hidden in implicit rules of credit and markets. Taylor (2019) identifies how Black homeownership caused property values to drop on the one hand, while lenders rationalized race as risky, more expensive debt on the other. The vicious cycle of racism expressed through property values and mortgage premiums drove Black homebuyers out of the suburbs and into predatory mortgages for distressed urban homes, cementing their financial exclusion within years after credit markets finally opened up. In the end, "the turn to inclusion was only allowable by maintaining other forms of exclusion. Credit inclusion became possible by holding the line on neighborhood exclusion" (ibid. p. 254).

Theorizing "Development"

In the standard economic account of growth-driven national development, nations develop into modern economic powerhouses by transitioning their agrarian economies towards large-scale industrial manufacturing (Lewis 1954; Rodrik 2013; Amirapu and Subramanian 2015). To

theorize development further, I turn to the sociology of development – in particular Peter Evans' notion of 'Dependent Development' (1979). Following Cardoso's definition (used by Evans) of development as "the accumulation of capital and its effect on the differentiation of the productive system," we can define **development as the micro-level effects of capital accumulation on the differentiation of *people* within the productive system**. Predatory development implies some movement of incorporating people into greater productive capacities while preventing them from accumulating capital by entering the elite-dominated formal sector workforce.

Thus from Evans, I borrow two main insights to theorize predatory development. The first is the paramount role played by ideological cohesion in explaining the behavior of the "triple alliance" between state actors, domestic capitalists and multinational corporations that shut out the vast majority of Brazilians from economic development. Applied to India, this highlights the importance of not interpreting elite-led projects of development as based on any "objective" economic conditions, but rather at least as likely to be ideologically-driven agendas prone to self-contradiction and committed to the preservation of their narrow economic interests.

The economic exclusion of low-wage service workers, for instance, was a myopic and entirely avoidable consequence of the instinct to protect the triple alliance at all costs. Elite-led development, as Evans sees it, is an ideological project that exercises power over the entire population, but is concerned above all with reproducing itself. This frees us from seeking to explain the economic rationale behind the more bewildering decisions taken in the name of Indian development; instead we might ask which alliances, ideologies and exclusionary economic interests elites are trying to protect. Such an approach enables us to deal with a glaring conundrum in Chapter 4 from the perspective of macroeconomic reason: namely, why would leaders of a developmental state like India be so hasty to discredit the public educational

infrastructure that they themselves had built at such cost and effort, and which by all accounts succeeded in providing universal education to all Indians?

Dependent development offers a good starting point for analysis because India is engaging in a neoliberal effort to develop its large workforce into the "Human Resources Capital of the World" (Modi 2015). Dependent development was a "revolutionary" economic moment in the sense it marked Brazil's technical transition from an agricultural economy to a manufacturing one. But the significance of industrialism to economic development is that it enables the agrarian workforce to enter industry, paving the way for a modern society and the creation of a real middle class. That did not happen in Brazil. Nor should we assume it will in India either, where the informal share of the workforce actually *increased* to an astonishing 92% after three decades of ultra-rapid economic growth (Murthy 2019). Indian industry and high-end services are extremely capital-intensive, involving a slim minority of the population while accounting for a lion's share of economic growth. This helps put the predatory development of education in perspective: even as hundreds of millions of Indian youth made historic investments in schooling out of a very modern sensibility to enter into an upwardly mobile career, they confront not only their own marginalization but also a deep macroeconomic inertia that seeks to reproduce the basic structure of the caste economy.

One shortcoming of Evans' macroeconomic study is that it does not explain the micro-level mechanisms behind the stubborn persistence of low wage informal sector work in the guise of a "new" service economy. One of my study's contributions is thus in its micro-level focus. Predatory development differentiates people *away* from roles underproductive to the accumulation of capital, and simultaneously differentiates the capital-holding elite from these new arrangements of people within the productive system. As an elite-led form of development

then, the goal is to constantly incorporate the masses into the productive process, improving the rate of capitalist accumulation while preventing them from becoming the wrong kinds of people – that is, undifferentiated from the alliance of elites.

The Role of Caste

If encoded racial attitudes are the mechanism responsible for entrenched financial inequities and predatory inclusion in American capitalism, then encoded ideologies of caste must be their counterpart in Indian development. While education in India is conventionally seen as a failure of policy with a track record of poor learning outcomes (Pratham 2021), I argue that the social forces driving predatory outcomes in the Indian education system are better understood through the lens of caste. Caste, to paraphrase Ambedkar, is a division of labor*ers* – a "hierarchy in which the laborers are graded one above the other" (Ambedkar 1936). Unlike White supremacy, which is rooted in ownership of people and property, Brahminical supremacy established hegemonic control over knowledge itself, with an unwritten yet elaborate moral framework that codified both people and knowledge as either sacred or profane, restricting formal learning and education from all but a privileged few (Ambedkar 1968).

For Dalits and other outcaste groups, even accidentally overhearing Sanskrit shlokas uttered by a Brahmin was a crime punishable by molten lead poured into the offending ear (*ibid*.). Anti-caste social reformers had long championed literacy as *the* precondition for Dalit emancipation, because education directly challenged Brahmins' exclusive claims to knowledge over rituals, rights and their interpretations (Phule 1885). Education, in other words, enabled one to transform into a different *category* of person, transcending the conditions of their birth and their caste. A

Dalit friend once shared with me an expression he had heard repeatedly throughout his life: "Education is the one thing they can't take away from you, because it stays in your mind."

Two distinct features of caste are its preoccupation with **how people are defined into ontological categories** and **presumption of social inequality**, which always threatens to jeopardize political equality and the rule of law. Moreover, caste functions through mapping people symbolically onto the body politic, assigning their relative place, role and worth within a social hierarchy known in most Indian languages as *varna*. While the English term "caste" generally refers to the smaller and highly localized community identities known as *jati* (which is more salient in the day-to-day experience of caste), *varna* describes the 'natural' order of social relations using the human body as a metaphor[2]. The social hierarchy of those bound to knowledge, those bound to rule, and those born to serve is captured in the Varna system elaborated by the Laws of Manu established 2nd or 3rd century BCE. The legal code imagined ancient Hindu society as a division of four *varnas* symbolically inscribed onto the body:

1. *Brahmins* constituted the head: the scholarly *varna* of priests and scholars
2. *Kshatriyas* constituted the arms: the noble *varna* of rulers, administrators or warriors
3. *Vaishyas* constituted the torso: the commercial *varna* of farmers and merchants
4. *Shudras* constituted the legs: the toiling *varna* of artisans, laborers or servants

The division of *varnas* provides a logic of social stratification that structures caste. The function of each *varna* in society corresponded to their symbolic place in the body, as well as their social rank. The first three *varnas* comprise the Hindu upper castes, only 10-15% of the

[2] Across India there are an estimated 2,000 – 3,000 distinct *jatis,* which were historically organized around the specific occupations assigned to each community and all of its members from birth, and which traditionally would have determined their lives until they died. While the *varna* position of a given *jati* and the social status of its hereditary occupation usually correspond, the complex social rules governing *jatis* allow for more social fluidity, ambiguity and group contention than the rigid hierarchy of *varna*. Ashwini Deshpande (2003) argues that "the *varnas* provide a scale of status to which the *jatis* try to align themselves" but never completely. We can pose this point another way by asking whether *varnas* can also have a countervailing stifling effect on the relative social dynamism of *jatis*.

total Indian population but entitled to a privileged share of the social body both symbolically and structurally. Even today, anti-caste activists and intellectuals use the term *Manusmriti* to critique the continuous upper caste domination of India's professional and corporate classes, state bureaucracy and formal economy.

Outside the four *varnas* are the *ati-shudras*, or groups considered so impure or alien that they risk the social body altogether: namely, Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis). Dalits and Adivasis, who together comprise 25% of the entire Indian population (Census of India 2011), are not even counted among the Shudra category; they are *avarnas* or outcastes, falling outside the social body altogether[3]. It is for this reason that conferring education and expertise to Dalits and Adivasis remains so contentious to this day – social violation, and social victory, all at once. India's 100 million tribal or *Adivasi* people rank so low in the caste hierarchy that in the national imagination they are still portrayed as either primitive innocents, untouched by civilization, or as savages in dark forests, with their practices of voodoo and witchcraft (Das Gupta 2019; Xaxa 2016; Anderson and Joro 2017). As a category, Scheduled Tribes lag behind almost every other social group in virtually any measure of income, education or well-being, and frequently face extreme levels of deprivation, state neglect, and outright physical violence – all of which is compounded by their relative isolation (Guha 2007).

The extensive and systemic disadvantages faced by Dalits and Adivasi even today make it clear that caste-based inequality remains a structural fact in India that cannot be explained away by the general conditions of poverty and underdevelopment alone. 72% of all Dalits and Adivasis across India were found to occupy the lowest occupational tiers: "farm, fish, hunt, log"

[3] Brahmins, by contrast, make up no more than 4% of the population yet account for 44% of corporate board members, 72% of senior civil servants and nearly 90% of major media leadership by some estimates (Ajit et al. 2012, Singh 1990, Mahato et al. 2022).

(Deshpande 2003). Scheduled groups are also disproportionately engaged in notoriously dangerous and exploitative forms of labor. Dalits comprise 97% of manual scavengers and 92% of sewer cleaners – both historically 'outcaste' occupations still marked by gross labor violations and thousands of worker fatalities each year (Chhara 2023; HRW 2014).

On the other end of the line, Dalits and Adivasis have also been shut out of most elite occupations and positions of class privilege. Deshpande (2003) finds that that only 0.55% of SCs in Delhi worked in the most prestigious occupational category (out of 16). This disparity grows especially extreme among the most elite and influential sectors of India's economy and society. Scheduled Castes, Tribes and Other Backwards Castes (OBCs) together comprise at least 61% of the Indian population, but their representation among IIT faculty members does not even reach 2% combined (Lok Sabha 2019). An Oxfam survey of caste representation in newsrooms found that just 3.6% of senior leadership across all Indian media identified as Dalit or Adivasi; OBCs made up another 3.6% while upper or "original castes" accounted for a whopping 88% majority (Mahato et al. 2022).

The Indian state has been explicitly committed to reducing social disparities facing Dalits and Adivasis since it was officially written into its Constitution. One landmark progressive achievement in the 1990s was the implementation of an affirmative action program that reserves 22.5% of all public sector jobs, electoral constituencies and public university admissions for Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The "Reservations" policy is credited with democratically remaking the state and with making universal education even possible for Dalit and Adivasi students, since they could no longer be categorically rejected.

But while affirmative action resulted in much better representation in publicly-funded spaces, public sector quotas numerically account for only a small fraction of the population they

serve. Representation is important, but to the only way to end higher education disparities at the population level is to build enough schools and universities. One of the most significant features of the 2009 Right to Education Act was it made the state responsible for building schools anywhere children weren't being served. This requirement led to construction of new schools in places like Araku Valley, which were previously considered too remote to build in, and acceptable to neglect.

The new *modus operandi* thus involved a small but radical shift in the state's orientation towards marginalized people and the claims they made. The success of universal public education, even in severely excluded and underdeveloped regions like Araku Valley, therefore brings dynamics of caste and social exclusion in ever greater relief. It also puts us back to Jyotirao Phule's argument in *Slavery* that Brahmins exerted control over Shudras by withholding access to education and "so contrived to entwine himself round the Sudra in every large or small undertaking, in every domestic or public business" (Phule 1873):

> "But the central question remains – how could the Brahmins have gotten away with such a preposterous and self-interested system of laws for so long? How could this small minority so successfully have enslaved the many? Having by his superior education and cunning monopolized all the highest places of emoluments, the ingenuity of his ways is past finding out, as the reader will find on an attentive perusal of this book. In the most insignificant village as in the largest town, the Brahmin is the all in all; the be-all and the end-all of the Ryot. He is the master, the ruler. The Patell of a village, the headman, is in fact a nonentity. The Koolkurnee, the hereditary Brahmin village accountant, the notorious quarrel-monger, moulds the Patell according to his wishes. He is the temporal and spiritual adviser of the ryots, the Soucar in his necessities and the general referee in all matters."

> "I sincerely hope that Government will ere long see the error of their ways, trust less to writers or men who look through high-class spectacles and take that glory into their own hands of emancipating my Shudra brethren from the trammels of bondage which the Brahmins have woven round them like the coils of a serpent. It is no less the duty of such of my Shudra brethren as have received any education to place before Government the true state of their fellow men and endeavour to the best of their power to emancipate themselves from Brahmin thralldom. Let there be schools for the Shudras in every village; but away with all Brahmin schoolmasters!"

A system of education that "overeducated the few" and left the "mass of people as ignorant as ever" was recognized as a central social problem as far back as the 1880s. Phule pursued a

similar vein of thought in his 1881 address to the Education Commission, in which he critiqued the government's over-emphasis on higher education – disproportionately benefitting Brahmins, while returning little in terms of taxes or civic duty – while neglecting primary schooling for the masses (Phule 1881):

> "A good deal of their poverty, their want of self-reliance, their entire dependence upon the learned and intelligent classes, is attributable to this deplorable state of education among the peasantry."

What the social history of caste makes abundantly clear is that the "holy grail" of universal education in 21st century India represented so much more than a critical 'milestone' in the great race for global development. True, any ambitious developing country almost certainly required a reasonably literate and informed citizenry who were, as Weber idealized, "rational" and "scientifically-minded" (Kalberg 1980) enough to join the elite country club of advanced nations. But universal education also signifies something distinctly Indian, the historic evolution of a political struggle as old as modern education in India itself: a proposition to undermine the very logic of caste domination by way of modern formal education for all.

No sociological analysis of cultural ties between the pursuit of education and the contemporary dilemmas of Indian development is complete without close attention paid to caste. Access to quality education for all in Independent India, then, was a critical *political* project for generations of the country's progressive social activists and thinks like Phule and Ambedkar, a central pillar of the project to enshrine equal rights for all individuals. But India's education system remained the domain of "the learned few" for decades after independence, while the majority of lower-caste Indian children would not even complete primary school before entering into punishing occupations assigned to lower castes. It was only in the 1990s, after a concerted series of progressive reforms and multilateral investments, that primary school enrollment levels even crossed 90%. Still, it meant that Phule's radical social vision had finally been realized.

Predatory Development: A Complete Definition

Having laid out the various analytical components of predatory development, I will now propose a complete definition of the concept to guide the rest of this study. Let us begin with the following four propositions:

1. From Evans (1979), I define elite-led development in India as a process of (1) further incorporating the masses into the productive process, improving the rate of capitalist accumulation, while (2) maintaining the categorical differentiation between the personhood of the masses and the personhood of elites.
2. From the racial capitalism literature on predation, I suggest caste as the corresponding mechanism in India. Specifically, caste informs taken-for-granted ideas of where social groups belong in a hierarchical division of labor laid out by the *varna* typology. The 10% of Indians from upper castes lay real and symbolic claim to the gamut of India's professional and corporate classes, state bureaucracy and formal economy.
3. Inclusiveness in education, the historical monopoly of upper castes, is a necessity for continued development of human capital and India's market economy. But insofar as education provides the lower castes with a legitimate claim to upper caste roles, it poses a threat to the caste order. This is possible because marginalized groups in India see education as not only a credential but as a path toward social citizenship.
4. Finally, to follow Taylor (2019), I propose that inclusion in education was made possible only with continued exclusion from formal labor markets – the very sorts of occupational roles that, if taken up by lowered castes, threatened to undermine the integrity of the whole caste system.

Taking the four propositions together gives us a definition of elite-led development in India as a problem of incorporating the masses into the productive processes of capital accumulation, while maintaining the categorical distinction between (lower caste) masses and (upper caste) elites. Education is the primary tool policymakers have for incorporation vis-à-vis human capital development. At the same time, if we understand caste to be a division of laborers, then elite castes are differentiated by their symbolic claim over the professional occupations that constitute formal labor markets, and which often have minimum education requirements in order to apply. Educational inclusion therefore upsets this symbolic differentiation when marginalized groups aspire to enter formal labor markets by way of formal education and credentialed expertise, the prerequisite entry barriers for modern professionals.

Predatory development, then, refers to when the educational inclusion of historically marginalized groups in India is undermined by the introduction of new conditions that limit their potential for social mobility and ensure their exclusion from formal labor markets. These can include visible, institutional conditions like the well-documented problem of credential inflation and poor quality education (Collins 2019; McMillan Cottom 2017). But they also include symbolic, discursive conditions to reconfigure the cultural value of schooling and the social worth of its graduates. The symbolic and discursive conditions help ensure that even when marginalized students overcome the hurdles of poorly funded schools – for instance, by working hard or having dedicated teachers – they are still legitimately disqualified from entering formal sector roles with good pay, fair regulations and career stability. Predatory development results in Sisyphean conditions for lower-caste youth trapped in a perpetual search for secure, formal jobs that always remain just beyond reach, regardless of their education or talent. The very system of formal education redirects them back to their "rightful" place as cheap, precarious labor.

Setting

This dissertation examines Indian tribal people's quest for 'real development' as it played out over a highly consequential decade in the tribal highlands of Araku Valley between 2012 and 2023. Over this period, the Valley witnessed an unprecedented expansion of state and private investment in the economic development of long-neglected "backward areas" in order to finally incorporate tribal people and territories into the Indian mainstream, a top national priority following the quelling of a decades-long Maoist insurgency in Andhra Pradesh (Kennedy and Purushotham 2012; Kennedy and King 2013). Thanks to tourism, the scenic tribal highlands of Araku Valley are the national face of the 2,400 sq. mile Visakhapatnam Agency, a remote and

rugged territory within the Eastern Ghats mountain range that is home to at least 600,000 tribal people spread across 3500 towns and villages (Purushotham and Mishra 2016). Scott (2009) refers to such areas as "zones of refuge" where the relatively inaccessible terrain allowed a variety of peoples to avoid incorporation into state-making projects.

Many of those people who historically inhabited the more or less contiguous hilly, forested regions of central India are widely referred to as "tribals," "Girijans" or "Adivasis," a category that encompasses a remarkably diverse group of communities classified by the Indian Constitution as "Scheduled Tribes" (Guha 2007). These 100 million people are nevertheless united by their historical exclusion from India's mainstream "plains society" – the setting for all Indian states former and present, all of its densely populated cities, not to mention the caste system structuring Hindu society for millennia. "The basic mark of differentiation was between those who were part of civilization and those who were not" (Xaxa 1999).

Long considered a remote hill station of undeveloped hamlets and subsistence farmers minimally connected to the outside world, Araku Valley became the target of intense security measures and developmental assistance after a militant left-wing uprising swept through the Valley in the early 2000s. As part of the government's "mainstreaming" agenda, children were removed from their villages and placed in residential high schools, and encouraged to pursue continued education as well as various skill development and job training programs. This resulted in a sharp generational divide between often-illiterate tribal farmers and their educated children socialized with middle-class aspirations for work and education. Araku Valley is a strategic site because the sudden expansion of developmental efforts (often funded by the central government's Ministry of Home Affairs) in this historically isolated region puts the processes I am interested in studying in sharper relief than they are in more urbanized areas – that is, in

places where modern economic development policies, domestic capitalism, and global markets-driven commodification have all already left a considerable footprint in relation.

Despite the post-colonial government's recognition of the special developmental needs of tribal people and enshrined constitutional protections for Scheduled Tribes (Nehru 1955; von Fürer-Haimendorf 1967), the exploitation and dispossession of Adivasi communities hardly slowed in independent India. The driving force of their marginalization remained the supposed developmental needs of the state: the construction of large dams, mines, industrial townships and even national parks collectively dispossessed as many as 20 million tribal people by 2005, often with little to no legal compensation (Guha 2007). At the same time, the state remained absent from Adivasi areas when it came to the provision of healthcare, nutrition and education they were entitled to as Indian citizens. As late as 2001, half of all tribal people lived beneath the poverty line; less than a quarter could read; 29 percent had no access whatsoever to doctors or clinics, while only 43 percent could access safe drinking water (Maharatna 2005; Guha 2007). Adivasis fared far worse on these measures than even Dalits and Muslims, the other severely marginalized groups of India.

Nevertheless, state-sponsored development measures eventually worked to transform the social landscape of the Visakhapatnam Agency. When I first arrived in Araku Valley in 2012, expecting to witness an area in revolt, I was shocked to discover instead how thoroughly the new developmental paradigm had infused all aspects of daily life. "Development" was the word of the day, every day, reflecting Valley residents' complete preoccupation with obtaining ration cards, registering land titles, receiving farm subsidies, obtaining their fair share of NREGA hours and so forth – even if it sought greater control over their lives, most Adivasi people seemed to welcome the developmental state so long as they received their entitled benefits.

Nowhere was the embrace of developmentalism more striking than it was with the state-funded expansion of "K to 8 education"[4] as a free and universal right of every child in India – most notably those living in impoverished rural areas, like the Visakhapatnam Agency, that had been virtually excluded even from the most basic forms of elementary schooling.

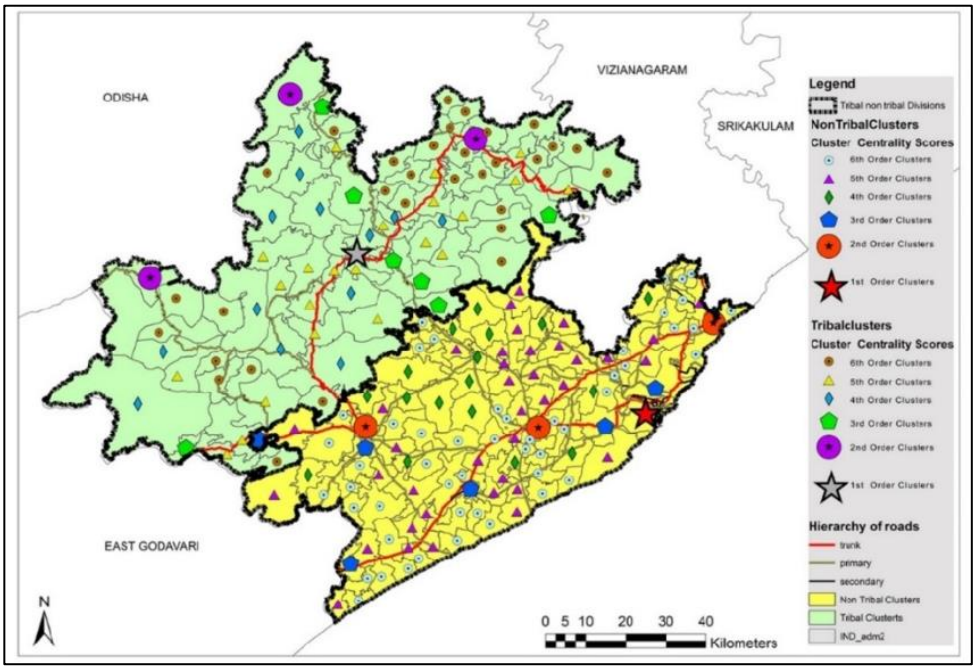


Fig. 2: Development Map of Visakhapatnam District (pre-2021), with Agency areas shaded in green (source: District of Visakhapatnam government).

Counterinsurgency funds made possible the construction of residential high schools and colleges all across the Agency, which suddenly drained tribal villages of young bodies as Adivasi youth overwhelmingly elected to spend their formative years in new hostels under the state's care. Literacy rates in the Visakhapatnam Agency rose from 34% in 2001 to 49% in 2016, with female literacy nearly doubling from 23% to 41% (Reddy 2020). In 2001, enrollment in high school remained in the single digits for both tribal men and women. By 2016, gross enrollment ratios for scheduled tribes across AP hit 99% in primary school and 66% in

[4] "K to 8 education" stands for compulsory elementary and middle school education from Kindergarten through 8th grade (or until the age of 15), as specified by India's 2009 Right to Education Act.

secondary. Not only were most young Adivasis now successfully completing secondary schooling, but many also went on to pursue higher education at the graduate and even postgraduate level – often at great expense to their families. Between 2014 to 2019, GERs of Adivasis in higher education rose from 20.5% to 26.5% for men and 23% to 30.4% for women. In other words, the share of Adivasi women attending college in 2019 was significantly higher than the share who even knew how to read only two decades prior!

Far from passively receiving the Janus-faced 'gift' of development, however, tribal people constantly negotiated with each other and with external actors and institutions to resist and reclaim what they called "real development" from terms they sensed to be harmful otherwise. This was especially true, as I further explain below, with predatory forms of development like education, which could not be rejected outright as blatant exploitation (e.g. mining), but required creative reconfiguration to preserve its positive social effects, while keeping at bay any harmful structural designs that would have you "stand at the gate and *salaam*," to quote Murthy.

This was deeply cultural and political work, because it required challenging and developing meaningful alternatives to the systems of moral and epistemological valuation inherent in all projects of human development (i.e. what makes for a better life, and why such judgements are legitimate or not). Unsurprisingly, effective resistance to predatory development appears as personal failure by design, since it entails continued participation in developmental institutions that define as success the very outcomes one wishes to defy – usually with some very visible, even "irrational" material tradeoffs. The unemployed tribal graduate who refuses to work as a driver or waiter for the rich, for instance, is still an unemployed man turning down a paying job.

It took me a long time to appreciate just how successful my Araku Valley respondents were in their efforts to subvert predatory development and reclaim its 'real' forms, however marginal

– something which I'm not sure they fully appreciated themselves, as I will show. But once I did, it helped demystify much of their behavior as rational, intentional developmental actors. I was then able to see how behind their persistent optimism in the face of extreme poverty, and frequent frustration of best laid plans, lay an accumulated patchwork of reclamation efforts that helped preserve local agency and cultural autonomy – while at the same time, steering away from "rational" but predatory outcomes that would have stripped them of dignity and self-worth.

Study Framework

There is much to suggest the underdevelopment of tribal areas is a problem of categorical inequality. The first indicator is how cleanly underdevelopment can be associated with a single demographic category – how easy it is to show, as we saw a few paragraphs earlier, the singular disadvantage of scheduled tribes relative even to other historically oppressed groups. Even if we chalk that up entirely to "rational" economic explanations like geography (for tribes do live in the hardest to reach places), we are still left with the confounding nature of "scheduled tribes" as a socially constructed category – one whose very identity, as we shall soon see, is fundamentally intertwined with anachronistic, externally imposed notions of pre-modernity and primitivism, despite many decades of contestations otherwise by actual tribal people themselves (Sivaramakrishna and Agarwal 2003; Sundar 2011; Skaria 2003).

What we are left with, then, are uncomfortable questions like whether the *Adivasi* category and the very conditions of their underdevelopment do not merely co-exist but are *co*-constituted – and how so, if true, and what it implies for the national project of development in India (Sundar 2007; Xaxa 2016). To consider development as nation-building, then, is to claim 'development' is really a definitional struggle over the *terms* of differentiation and progress. As Akhil Gupta

argued, what makes Indian modernity unique is how the "*fact of difference* itself is a constitutive moment that structures the experience of modernity" (Gupta 1999).

To that end, the question of what specifically counts as 'tribal' development in modern India better resonates with critiques of post-structuralist approaches which point out that 'literally countless millions of those outside the West constantly shape and produce development" (Sivaramakrishnan and Agarwal 2003). These works call for more nuanced examinations of efforts to integrate specific subaltern populations perceived as 'underdeveloped' into a body-politic perceived to be modern and rational. For these groups, development doesn't necessitate simply making the primitive modern, nor extending state rationality over a wild and unruly population (Agarwal 1996). Rather, development necessitates their very *construction* as a group either marked as 'developed,' or not.

My Approach

Drawing on these insights from critical development studies, this thesis examines the contradictory meanings and visions of "development" that drive the tremendous popularity and success of universal schooling in India. It does so by approaching education and development in India from a cultural sociology perspective. I examine educational inclusion as a process of "working misunderstandings" (Swidler and Watkins 2012) shaped by the various cultural agendas of the actors involved.

Cultural sociologists examine the cultural models, toolkits and schema that guide people's action and interpretations of the world (Illouz 2008). The causal stories and connections between linked events provided by culture become especially important in unsettled times of structural change, when consequential decisions must be made about unfamiliar choices that will impact an

unknown future ahead (Swidler 1986; Giddens 1991). A cultural sociology approach is thus useful in providing an account of people's motives and actions at moments of great uncertainty, whether new promises are being coordinated or older ones are going awry (Frye 2012; Frye 2019; Silva 2012; Swidler and Watkins 2012).

In this dissertation, I take a similar approach to the roll out of universal schooling as part of a new package of "tribal development" programs in Araku Valley between 2012 and 2023, which brought the possibility of education to one of India's most marginalized groups for the very first time. How exactly is education understood to mean "development" by various actors involved? What visions of a future society shape the participation of both the officials in charge *and* the beneficiaries on the ground? How do their respective cultural agendas come into conflict even as their actions align?

I argue that the possibility of predatory development exists when powerful actors eventually come to perceive current arrangements as a threat to their control, and attempt to subvert them by obfuscating the implicit meanings of "development" in popular programs. At same time, the cultural processes behind development reveal how participants on the ground become sophisticated cultural actors who are better able to resist these attempts to manipulate the shared developmental agenda.

Methods

This dissertation is based on semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork following a loose cohort of Adivasi youth (ages 19-37) coming of age in Araku Valley between 2012 and 2023. I spent 3.5 of those 11 years in and around the Valley on multiple research visits

that also took me across the state border to Odisha, as well as the city of Visakhapatnam – both regular destinations for Araku folk. Following my first trip in April 2012, I returned again in 2013, 2014, 2015, and twice in 2016. Each of these visits took 2-3 months. After the pandemic I went back for 4 months in 2022 and 5 months in 2023.



Fig. 3: Going clockwise from top left, a Kondh tribal man in front of his hut in 2012; a woman smokes by her home in 2015; an Adivasi girl receives mid-day meals at her school in 2014; a wife and husband in front of their unfinished home funded by a government housing scheme.

My entry into the field site and subsequent fieldwork was facilitated by a small local non-profit operated by a veteran Adivasi activist named Venkata Rao. Since Venkata Rao is a member of the *Valmiki* tribe, one of the more dominant tribal groups in the Agency, members of his community somewhat overrepresented in my data as well. I have done my best to compensate for this through inconvenience sampling, seeking socioeconomic variation in the communities

sampled, and finding alternative conduits for research participants. I've made sure include participants from both "roadside" and "interior" villages – the main axis between relatively more and relatively less developed villages in the Agency. At the end of the day, however, sociological variation is quite limited in Araku because it is a place that is historically poor, excluded and marginalized. I'm confident any sampling bias does not affect the story I tell here on predatory development, which is a story about the overwhelming majority of Agency youth, as well as many non-Agency youth. More details on methodological choices are available in the Appendix.

My research methods also involve a series of semi-structured interviews with 41 young people (aged 18-30) attempting to overcome exclusion**,** drawing on an interview schedule that includes questions on my respondents' job market attempts, aspirations and cognitive rankings of what they consider to be high status and low status work. These interviews provided verbal accounts by young people as they, first, navigate a tight labor market in flux, and second, respond to new categories of a worker's worth and value imposed from above. The interviews were at least an hour-long, semi-structured conversations that focused on respondents' aspirations, strategies for finding work, evaluations of various income-making opportunities available to them, economic frustrations and personal interpretations of concepts like decent work, skill and economic success.

Although I also interviewed older generations of tribal farmers as well as a small sub-sample of urban youth with relative privileges of caste and proximity to mainstream development, the interview respondents are primarily underprivileged young men and women from the Visakhapatnam Agency. There interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023. Most of my participants worked, though all but 12 still considered themselves unemployed as they continued searching for government jobs. Interestingly, not a single responded felt their educations had

been a waste. More interestingly, most respondents actively chose to avoid low-wage 'private sector' jobs in the city because they felt those were not appropriate jobs for educated people, except in the most desperate circumstances. Most had also returned to farming their family land – physical labor that did not warrant the same scruples. These are two of the major findings I examine in more details throughout this book.

This fieldwork is supplemented by an extensive review of "developmental discourse" produced by government officials, policy experts and corporate actors involved in the promotion of ever higher rates of growth and the country's ever deeper integration into global markets. These actors include business executives participating in news panels and forums such as Davos, bureaucrats in the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, members of the National Sector Skill Councils (tasked with developing standardized skill requirements for each sector), members of international organizations such as the ILO, and trainers and directors at skill development institutes established across India. I analyze publicly-available discourse by these political and economic elites in order to deconstruct what these actors meant when referring to the skills gap and (un)skilled workers. My qualitative, mixed-methodological approach enables me to synchronically examine the frictions between policy elites confronted with the problem of mass unemployment and the worldviews and strategies of young people struggling to find work in 21st century India.

Overview of Empirical Content

The six empirical chapters examine the rapid rise and collapse of education-based mobility as experienced by some of the most marginalized and impoverished people in an already poor country: the first fully literate generation of Scheduled Tribe youth in the eastern Indian

highlands, the first ever to widely attend school and engage with the outside world. Drawing on extended ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews, the chapters follow a cohort of Adivasi youth (ages 19-37) as they come of age in Araku Valley between 2012 and 2023. The first chapters examine 1) the contentious politics of exclusion and development in my field site, Araku Valley; and 2) the immense value placed on education by people most oppressed by the Indian caste system, which has historically justified their complete exclusion from formal schooling. Chapter 4 analyzes what I argue is the primary mechanism of predatory development in action: the incoherent national alarm over "skill shortages" and "unemployability" emerging just as large numbers of lower caste students finally accessed higher education and demanded entry into upper caste-dominated formal employment.

By 2017, my Araku cohort realizes they have more or less been labeled as unskilled and unemployable, members of unfathomably large generation non-upper caste youth who tried to study their way out of caste occupations, and were now deemed a "demographic burden" for their efforts. Chapters 5 & 6 examine how this cohort copes with the traumatic devaluation of their efforts by returning to "traditional livelihoods" as farmers – yet simultaneously reshaping the political economy of tribal areas as they assert new forms of economic agency and resist old forms of tribal exploitation. While some young men drop job aspirations to work in transportation, many keep the dream alive. Surprisingly, not a single respondent agreed with the statement that their education was a waste of time and money. Almost all of them also moved back to their villages, where they farmed and started businesses while continuing the search.

I try to show that the intense desires of marginalized Indian youth to "become an educated person" is rooted as much in education's transformative potential – the promise of dignity and of a different category of personhood – as it is in economic and labor market calculations; relational

caste histories and anti-caste accounts of education became especially salient when it failed to materialize in gainful employment. Even when denied formal opportunities for upward mobility, like white collar employment, Adivasi youth continued to nurture the networks and study circles they created as students, finding ways to fulfill the role of an upstanding, educated person at home. There, their studies and capabilities could be put to use in countless ways, whether to obtain official documentation for the family land, escort an elderly aunt to the city hospital, or to invest in the budding tribal-operated tourism industry, which came up with ingenious and inexpensive ways for adivasis to finally benefit from the tourism coming to their area.

Even in so-called failure, I want to call attention to the ways in which tribal youth could still make use of their education to improve the conditions of their own lives and communities – a new awareness that dramatically curtailed outsider exploitation of Adivasis. No longer could an unscrupulous city businessman purchase prime tribal land for a song, or defraud illiterate farmers with false weights. Even the most wizened, traditional grandmother would always have a son or niece or grandson quick to protect her from classic exploitative practices (although new, digital cons also emerged, of course). Even the motor field "drop outs" had figured it out: they were all running their own businesses now, constantly finding new hustles, and constantly present in one another's lives.

Chapter 1
Arrested Development

> "What empty chatter: liberty, equality, fraternity, love, honour, country, and who knows what else? That did not prevent us from holding forth at the same time in racist language: filthy n***er, filthy Jew, filthy North Africans. Enlightened, liberal and sensitive souls – in short, neocolonialists – claimed to be shocked by this inconsistency; that is an error or bad faith. Nothing is more consistent, among us, than racist humanism, since Europeans have only been able to make themselves human beings by creating slaves and monsters."
>
> *– Jean-Paul Sarte (1961)*

Introduction

For over one hundred years, the road that bisects the highlands of Araku Valley has remained the sole asphalt link between the district of Visakhapatnam's emerald frontiers and the rest of India. The Valley belongs to a range of mountains known as the Eastern Ghats, and bears little resemblance to the bustling district capital (a port city also named Visakhapatnam, or Vizag, that serves as one of the major shipping centers of India's eastern coast). The Vizag-Araku road begins in Visakhapatnam proper and runs perfectly straight through 180 kilometers of warm, wet coastal plains before reaching the foothills of the Ghats. Then it begins its laborious ascent, slowly making its way up the mountain face with one hairpin turn after another.

As the route transforms, making novices of even the most experienced drivers, so too does the world around it. The forest suddenly grows thick; the jackfruit and mango trees improbably reach enough heights to block out the sun. Packs of monkeys gather to lazily feast on abundant fruit, or simply to claim the warmest perch. The air is fresher here, cooler. The wind is fragrant with hints of eucalyptus and recent rain. With every bend in the road, and every marginal climb in elevation they bring, the customary din of the most peopled nation on earth slips further behind, giving way to what sounds at first like silence. Only gradually do your ears pick up the call of distant birds and burbling springs: the hushed sounds of mountain.

For miles, as the road meticulously switchbacks up the Ghats – from the Sanskrit word for 'slopes' – there is only the dense forest. The drive uphill is a nearly two-hour journey during which there is no cell phone signal, nor buildings, nor even much traffic save the occasional municipal bus or tourist vehicle careening dangerously around the bends. The Eastern Ghats run parallel to the Bay of Bengal along India's eastern coast, extending 1,100 miles across the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. They resemble the Appalachian Mountains in both their sprawling breadth and modest elevations, a natural barrier spanning the eastern Indian seaboard at about 3,000 to 4,000 feet above sea level. This results in a long fringe of distant-but-not-too-distant highlands running just beyond the coastal plains, whose distinctively rugged yet habitable geography has blessed the lowlands below with ecological bounty since before the earliest subcontinental civilizations took root.

The lush, densely-populated coastal plains of Andhra Pradesh, in particular, depend on the waters flowing from the ghats and on the essential role they play in the water cycle. The slopes trap and cool the warm, wet winds coming in from the Bay of Bengal, blanketing the range in a perpetual wreath of clouds. These clouds condense into a perennial network of streams that run along the coastal plains. These streams in turn keep major waterways like the Rivers Krishna and Godavari flowing even during the exceptionally hot, humid Andhra summer. Meanwhile, cool and foggy highlands like Araku Valley consist of a thick, red, clay-like soil that absorbs fresh water like a sponge. It helps make the groundwater in the Eastern Ghats some of the cleanest available anywhere in India. The rock naturally filters the groundwater, rendering it — quite miraculously, in a country beset by water-borne epidemics — safe to drink directly from a tap.



Fig. 1: Araku Valley after the harvest. Seen from the Vizag-Araku raod in January 2013.

The Ghats are replete with curiosities of the natural world, many of them unseen anywhere else on earth. They are home to over 200 species of birds, such as the Jerdon's courser, the red-whiskered bulbul, and the Indian paradise flycatcher. A keen listener could pick up 7, 8, maybe 10 different bird songs at any given moment. The Eastern Ghats are also habitat to over 30 species of mammals, like the gray slender loris and the Indian flying fox; to golden geckos, sacred grove bush frogs, and at least 130 other species of amphibians and reptiles; and finally some 2,500 species of flowering plants[5]. No fewer than 27 national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and tiger reserves have been established in the hills between the states of Andhra Pradesh and its northern neighbor Odisha alone; nearly 40% of *all* land in Visakhapatnam District (area: 11,161 km^2) is officially counted as forest area.[6]

[5] Sandhyarani et al. (2007)
[6] Forest Department. *Facts & Figures – 2013.* Government of Andhra Pradesh, March 2014.

Once the Vizag–Araku road nears its highest point, reaching over 2,000 feet in elevation, signs of human habitation gradually return: pretty terracotta huts painted bright blue and deep ochre, state-managed coffee plantations nestled among silver oaks, sweeping valley vistas checkered by paddy fields. Roadside hotels advertise "adventure camping" and "beautiful mountain views." Here the route straightens out, and the forest recedes too, revealing the spectacular expanse of Araku Valley. Here the landscape soars open with green pastures and red dirt and gentle slopes extending into the horizon. At day the clouds cast dramatic shadows that roam slowly overland. At night the moonlight bathes the peaks in its ethereal glow.

India's 'Backward' and 'Scheduled' Areas

At 1.4 billion people, India is now the most populated country in the world. In such a hot, densely crowded country, Araku Valley is well known as a natural paradise unspoiled by modernity. But for the people who live here, the unpaved roads, earthen homes, rustic landscape are reminders of living in place that has been utterly left behind. My host in Araku Valley was a veteran tribal rights activist named Venkata Rao. When I asked him once if he too ever felt awestruck by the landscape, his reply was curt: "You see natural beauty, I only see our poverty and our underdevelopment."

The Valley is designated as a "Backward District" by the Indian government. India's 'backward' districts are considered its least developed areas both because they tend to have both the worst outcomes on health, economic and social well-being, and the fewest modern amenities and infrastructure. And while there are backward regions throughout India, the Valley's

https://forests.ap.gov.in/PDF/publications/Factsandfigures13.pdf. Accessed 18 July 2024.

developmental status further stands out because it is also classified as a Scheduled Area. The Valley is situated within a special administrative zone called the Vishakhapatnam Agency, a 2,430-square mile[7] territory designated as tribal lands. This vast trans-Indian swath of rugged forests and peaks is historically home to a fantastically diverse group of roughly 80 million people whom the Indian state officially classifies as "scheduled tribes."

India's tribal people are not "tribes" in the commonly-construed sense of indigenous groups ravaged by European settler-colonialism, like the Native Americans. Nor can they be considered a vanishingly small minority, even by the outsized standards of Indian demography. If we add the Himalayan tribes of Kashmir and Northeastern India (the other scheduled tribal regions of India) to the Central Tribal Belt's count of 80 million people, all in all there are between 105 and 125 million scheduled tribal people living in India today. That amounts to just under a tenth of the entire Indian population – more than all Brahmins, Sikhs and Christians in India combined[8].

Rather, they are the various descendants of people who sought "zones of refuge" (Scott 2009) in the ungovernable geography of the Tribal Belt, where for centuries the inaccessible terrain provided safety and escape from hostile armies and state-making projects. Over time, as these groups settled into the lush hills and dense forests well beyond the day-to-day ambit of lowland Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms, they developed unique cultures, politics, languages and spiritual beliefs; the rugged lands in which they lived became known as Scheduled Areas (Guha 2007; Das Gupta 2019).

Over 700 national communities have come to be known as, alternatively, *girijans* ('hill dwellers'), *Adivasis* ('original men') or 'scheduled tribes.' They are, among other things,

[7] Mishra (n.d.): http://nirdpr.org.in/nird_docs/srsc/srsc230217-25.pdf
[8] See Starr and Sahgal (2021).

distinguished by their historical separation from the Hindu caste system and Brahminical religion. In the highlands, tribal communities developed alternative religious customs and ways of life reliant on the forest and shifting cultivation; freed from caste relations, they also developed relatively egalitarian gender norms and social hierarchies. As the Indian sociologist Virginius Xaxa observes, India's scheduled tribes "continue to be distinct today because they escaped colonization and subjugation" – referring not only to British rule but to past and present upper caste-dominated society as well (Xaxa 1999).

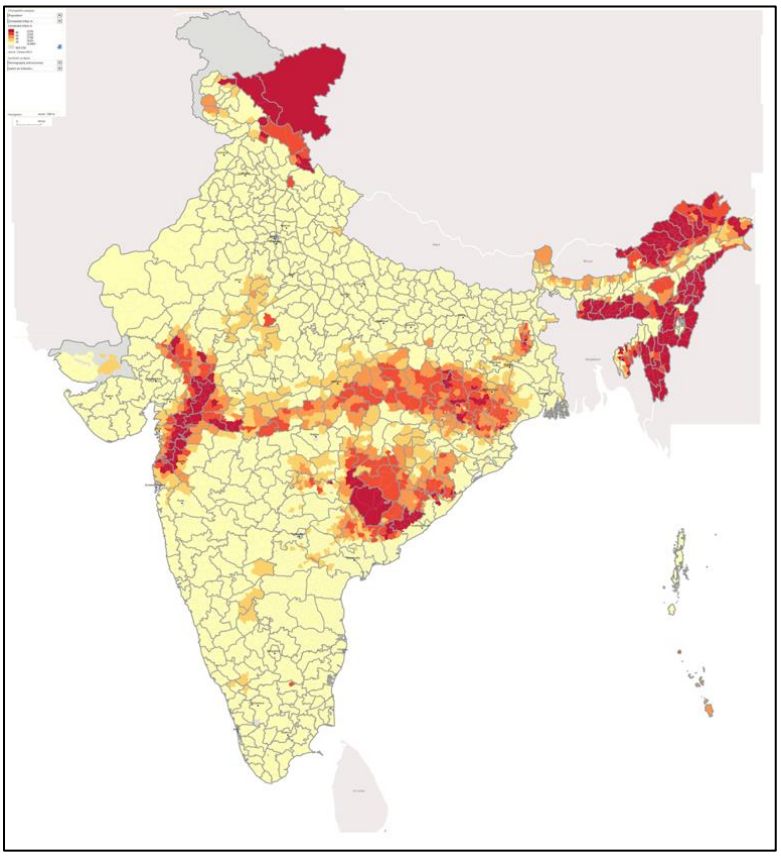


Fig. 2: The Central and Northern Indian Tribal Belts in red. Over 90% of India's 100 million tribal people live in "Scheduled" districts that remain the poorest regions in the country.

Even so, as a group today, India's Scheduled Tribes remain unquestionably the single most marginalized demographic in the country, consistently lagging behind even Dalits, Muslims and other historically oppressed groups on virtually every conventional indicator (Guha 2007,

Kennedy and Purushotham 2012, Xaxa 2016, Oskarsson 2018). Per the 2011 census,[9] 49 million tribal people lived below the Indian poverty line, a population share of 43% compared to 22% for the country at large – a gap that "remains one of the key concerns of the poverty debate in India" (Panagariya and More 2013, Xaxa 2016). Tribal literacy lagged behind at 59%, compared to the 74% national average (Min of Tribal Affairs 2023). And tribal infant mortality was measured at 67.7 deaths per 1000 live births compared to 44 per 1000 live births in India as a whole (Retnakumar and Krishnakumar 2020). All this in a country whose economy quadrupled in the two decades prior, averaging an annual growth rate of 6.6% between 1991 and 2011.

Meanwhile, the negative consequences of industrial development – namely land alienation and displacement – fell disproportionately upon scheduled tribes. Until recently, the state's lack of interest in the land they occupy have historically separated adivasis from life in Indian towns and cities. But since the Indian economy liberalized twenty years ago, prompting demands for ever higher growth rates, private business interests and the state have been keen to tap into the vast mineral resources of this region. An estimated 8.54 million people of 21 million displaced by dams, mines, factories, wildlife sanctuaries and other development projects between 1951-1990 are tribal – or 40% of the total for a group representing just 9% of the national population (Census of India 2001). This, despite the fact that social justice concerns around land rights for Adivasis have a long historical precedent in anti-colonial rebellions and struggles across central India – and despite the fact that constitutional land protections and affirmative action policies for tribal people remain stronger on paper in India than in many other countries around the world (Oskarsson 2018).

[9] 2011 was the latest year in which the decennial Census of India was conducted. Citing Covid-19, the Narendra Modi government postponed conducting a census in 2021; new data collection has not begun as of writing (Saju 2024).

As Xaxa argues, the reasons for India's disproportionately impoverished, malnourished and illiterate tribal population have "more to do with the dispossession that has been central to nation-building in post-independence India. Bluntly speaking, the nation has been on the march, but tribes have not. In fact, no social group in India has been treated as shabbily as tribes in the post-independence national construction process" (Xaxa 2016).

Or, in the words of Venkata Rao: "It is clear that the government doesn't respect tribal people. It is clear [the state] never had any respect for us."

The Tribal Development Racket

What does it mean to be underdeveloped as a people? What does it mean to be underdeveloped as a place? Both development and underdevelopment can be understood as collective projects that bring a variety of social actors with competing and even contradictory agendas into collaboration with one another. These various actors, whether state officials or tribal activists like Venkata Rao, articulate imagined futures of developed Scheduled Areas and characterize the underdevelopment of Scheduled Tribes, in both moments of coordination and conflict.

This puts the question towards cultural work and cultural meanings around "development" in its day-to-day uses and understandings. Scholars have studied how "working misunderstandings" between disparate actors, on the one hand, shape the forms developmental projects take (Watkins and Swidler 2012) while "boundary objects" (Star and Griesemer 1988) work to develop and maintain coherence across intersecting social worlds when diverse actors cooperate on a shared project. How does development function as an idea around which people, goals and actions are organized?



Fig. 3: Everyday agrarian life in Araku Valley. Two women rest while harvesting paddy (top-left); community dance at a Dusserha festival (top-right); a man makes clay vessels on a pottery wheel (bottom-left); a woman sells her wares at the weekly market (bottom-right).

In this chapter, I explore this question through ethnographic and historical accounts of "tribal development" as seen through the eyes of non-tribal elites and by tribes themselves. I do so in two ways: first by examining how tribal development is discussed from an official perspective – both at the highest echelons of government and at a "street level" bureaucratic perspective (Lipsky 1969) – followed by an examination of "real development" as invoked by tribal people on the ground in Araku Valley. I also take a closer examination at conflicts over the meaning of development through the specific examples of tourism and bauxite mining.

The social meanings of "development" provide a good object through which to analyze the

dynamics of predatory development because, as we shall see, the term "development" itself tends to unite actors with often-conflicting agendas and histories under a seemingly coherent and shared goal. The problem is that the meanings these various actors ascribe to "tribal development" tend to reflect contradictory worldviews and visions for the future of Araku Valley. I do this by showing, first, how official attitudes of tribal development envision the development of the Valley into a modern and 'unwilded' place while essentializing tribal people as fundamentally primitive and impossible to develop. This enables official actors to advocate for the expansion of capitalistic processes in the Scheduled Areas while reasserting essentialist colonial tropes about Adivasis.

Tribal views of development, on the other hand, argue for what many Adivasis in the Valley term "real development" as a counterpoint and alternative vision to official projects of development. Through developmental talk, Adivasi respondents spoke of imagined futures in which tribal people would be able to enjoy the same rights and economic agency they perceived "plains people" as benefiting from. By speaking of "real development," tribal peopled differentiated between forms of development that actually helped them, and forms of development on offer from state and non-states that they regarded as a continuation of historic forms of exploitation by other means.

What this reveals to us is that development is not a binary process that either happens or does not; rather it is a highly contingent project whose directions and meanings are shaped by prior attitudes and controversies among the actors involved. Importantly, developmental controversies did not preclude Adivasi engagement with the project of national economic development.

Official Attitudes on India's Underdeveloped Tribes

Colonial Origins

Although British authorities were first to classify India's various, ungoverned hill peoples as *tribes*, "the image and meaning underlying the category was far from a colonial construction" (Xaxa 2005). On the one hand, official depictions of tribal people and tribal lands, like the early modern orientalists, continue to romanticize "rustic" tribal customs and traditions like their elaborate piercings, facial tattoos and sacred forests on the one hand. On the other, tribal people and habitats have, for even longer, been associated with voodoo, witchcraft and *rakshashas*[10]. The Central Indian Tribal Belt holds literal mythical status as a place of banishment, danger and, ultimately, redemption for heroes of Hindu epics. The *Dandakaranya* forest, the demon kingdom to where Ram was exiled in the *Ramayana* epic, is said to be historically located within the Chhattisgarh Range. The heroes of the *Mahabharata*, too, spent their years of exile wandering lands known today as central India's Agency Areas[11].

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[10] A race of usually malevolent beings prominently featured in Hindu mythology. They possess supernatural powers, which they usually use for evil acts such as disrupting Vedic sacrifices or eating humans. They are the counterparts to *devathas*, who reside in heaven and mostly use their powers for good. Romila Thapar argues that the Rakshasas could represent exaggerated, supernatural depictions of demonized forest-dwellers who were outside caste society. (See Thapar, Romila. 2002. *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. Berkeley: University of California Press.)

[11] Fascinatingly, accounts of local Agency history within the Adivasi oral tradition are filled with detailed, geographically exact references to the great epics, including to chapters widely believed to be lost. The heroes of the *Mahabharata* for instance, the legendary Pandava brothers, were forced to spend 12 years in exile wandering the forests of Central India. This period is critical to the narrative as it sets the stage for the climactic war the epic is ultimately about, but even the most authoritative *Mahabharata* editions are vague about where exactly the Pandavas went and what exactly they did while in exile. But deep inside one of the interior areas around Araku rises a steep, rocky mountain whose Telugu name translates to *Mount Pandava*. Along its face run two mysterious fissures, perfectly parallel all the way from the base to the peak – almost as if someone had made high-precision cuts into the rock using modern machines, even though the fissures are clearly ancient and weathered. On top of Mount Pandava lives a village of marijuana farmers who say the fissures trace the path of none other than Arjuna himself, the most legendary Pandava brother, and were carved into the rock by the thunderous wheels of his blazing Sun Chariot. The village also contains a small and incredibly rare temple dedicated to the five Pandava brothers and their wife, Draupadi. The Adivasis of Mount Pandava spiritually consider themselves the Pandavas' faithful followers though *not* as Hindus – for whom the *Mahabharata* is incidentally the

Nevertheless, before the British arrived, there existed a relatively stable relationship between pre-colonial states and the "zones of relative autonomy" with their Adivasi inhabitants. Highland communities in the Eastern Ghats still enjoyed full autonomy over their lands and resources, as well as relatively egalitarian societies that exercised the freedom *not* to establish property rights, and mutual relations with lowland states that respected their territorial sovereignty (Kennedy and King 2013).

But the emergence of a modern state in British-ruled India changed the fundamental relationship between the people of these areas and the outside world, incorporating their traditional lands as state property while leaving the people to fend for themselves (Kennedy and Purushotham 2012; Shah 2010). Shocked to discover that "savage hill tribes…pay no taxes whatsoever," in 1878 colonial administrators declared all forests property of the state, and imposed the first ever regulations on the use and trade of forest products (Gov't of India 1861; Guha and Gadgil 1989; Sundar 2007). This move devastated traditional Adivasi livelihoods while opening forests up to outside contractors whose commercial activities stripped ancient forests in central India down to their stumps (Sundar 2007; Kennedy and King 2013).

Meanwhile, colonial anthropologists distinguished tribal peoples from mainstream Hindus and Muslims by what was considered their characteristic 'wildness,' which linked them in British eyes to other primitive people such as those in Africa (Shaw 1798, Das Gupta 2011, Chandra 2013, Das Gupta 2019). Legitimated by the scientific racism of the time, these differences were further codified through colonial administration. The first India-wide Census in 1872 and the subsequent Census of 1881 specified categories such as "Aboriginal Tribes" and "Semi-Hinduised Aboriginals," which served to validate and harden official boundaries between

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supreme sacred text.

"primitive" tribals and more "advanced" Hindu castes. The official reduction of Adivasis to a lesser state of human development also had the effect of erasing the long history of sophisticated trade negotiations and political arrangements between central India's highland peoples and their neighboring lowland states (Sundar 1999).

The Forest Act of 1878 and other Raj policies deprived Adivasis of traditional rights and livelihoods and subjected them to an unprecedented scale of exploitation and poverty; for these reasons the Central Tribal Belt in the 19th and early 20th century was home to numerous tribal insurgencies against vestiges of the colonial state (Gell 1997; Sundar 2007; Kennedy and King 2013). At the same time, the British Raj simultaneously endowed itself with a duty to protect "primitive, 'savage' subjects [who] had to be nurtured, trained and guided to progress and civilization, since, being child-like, they were incapable of pursuing their self-interest. In this scheme of things, it was colonial knowledge which determined what constituted the subject's primitiveness, culture and tradition as well as governance and reform" (Cohn 1996).

Tribal Development in Democratic Modern India

The tension between state control over tribal areas and benevolent state protection of tribal people carried onwards into the creation of the modern Indian republic, as the role of tribals as democratic Indian citizens came up repeatedly in the Constituent Assembly Debates to write a new constitution. An oft-cited December 1946 speech by the Adivasi leader (and Oxford-educated Olympic athlete) Jaipal Singh movingly foreshadowed the contentious relations between scheduled tribes and the newly-created Indian democratic republic in decades to come:

> "As a *jungli*, as an *Adivasi* I am not expected to understand the legal intricacies of the Resolution. But my common sense tells me that every one of us should march in that road to freedom and fight together. Sir, if there is any group of Indian people that has been shabbily treated it is my people. They have been disgracefully treated, neglected for the last 6,000 years. The history of the Indus Valley civilization, a child of which I am, shows quite clearly that it is the newcomers — most of you here

> are intruders as far as I am concerned — it is the newcomers who have driven away my people from the Indus Valley to the jungle fastness. The whole history of my people is one of continuous exploitation and dispossession by the non-aboriginals of India punctuated by rebellions and disorder, and yet I take Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru at his word. I take you all at your word that now we are going to start a new chapter, a new chapter of independent India where there is equality of opportunity, where no one would be neglected."[12]

Singh was demanding, as would a long line of Adivasi leaders after him, equal democratic rights and political participation for tribal people, as well as a measure of autonomy in tribal areas. In the predominant debates over scheduled tribes of post-colonial India, however, such Adivasi-led demands went unrecognized by either side. On the one hand, conservative scholars like G.S. Ghurye dismissed any distinctions between *Adivasis* and Hindus as a colonial construction, preferring to classify tribes instead as 'backwards Hindus' who desperately needed to be integrated with the 'civilized communities' of India (Ghurye 1943). On the other hand, 'isolationists' like the British anthropologist Verrier Elwin pushed for what was known as a 'national park' approach which sought to preserve what they saw as a timeless *Adivasi* culture unspoiled by modernity. Elwin, a British anthropologist and missionary who eventually became Nehru's advisor for tribal affairs, passionately argued that tribes were worse off when exposed to greater Hindu society, which sought to place them within the peasant production network, and that the state ought to impose a program of development through protective measures in 'excluded' Scheduled Areas (Elwin 1941; Nehru 1953).

At the moment of independence, when India was an impoverished country rebuilding itself after centuries of colonial extraction, political projects of nation building and economic projects of development were inextricably intertwined. It portended an incomplete initiation of tribes as democratic citizens of India: they were citizens of a new democratic regime in the sense of

[12] From Constituent Assembly Debates: Fifth Schedule (05 Sep 1949).

having rights to vote and having certain liberal protections guaranteed by law. But they were not in charge of their own development, and therefore not in charge of their own futures. The state retained ownership of all forest areas, effectively alienating tribal people from their own lands, while official roles for tribal people to directly participate in their own governance through special advisory councils became severely undermined. To a much greater degree than with the citizens of lowland India, decisions over how tribal people were governed, how social problems like malnutrition were identified and addressed, and their relations with the world beyond the Agency formally belonged to the administrative state, which also retained ownership of all forest areas.

"Underdevelopment was routinely tied to the isolation of tribal communities, and hence their integration was viewed as a panacea for the problem. Nationalist leadership has thus implied a conflict in the simultaneous presence of tribes and the nation," Xaxa writes in a 2016 essay for *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*. "It understood the nation in a particularly definite form, within which tribes did not fit. To be part of the nation, it was not sufficient for tribes to join the economic and political system; rather, this nationalism required them to assimilate into the socio-cultural system of larger India as well" (Xaxa 2016). By this he refers to the complex historical relationship between tribal communities and post-colonial national identity in India – one in which the former serves as an uncomfortable reminder of the flawed conceptions of the latter's progress.

The Red Corridor

By the mid-2000s, the underdevelopment of tribal areas had become a matter of national security. The severe dispossession of tribal people lent support to many people's movements

against the state and corporate class, following a long history of tribal rebellions since the British era (Guha 2007; Banerjee 2008; Padel 2009). The most recent and significant instance was widespread Adivasi support for "Naxalism," famously described by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as the "single biggest internal security challenge" India had ever faced (Singh 2006). During the early 2000s the insurgency shifted base to the Central Indian Tribal Belt, whose dense forests provided ideal cover for guerilla warfare, and tribal communities lent local support; acts of guerilla warfare lit up a "red corridor" of central Indian highlands, including the throughout the Visakhapatnam Agency (Kennedy and Purushotham 2012).

Meanwhile, tribes were the caught in the crossfire; the vast majority of Adivasis uninvolved in the conflict suffered extreme violence and violations of their human rights at the hands of the Maoist guerillas and counterinsurgency security forces alike. Countless Adivasis were thrown into jail without charge, homes were burned, women were raped and suspected informants killed (Balagopal 2006; Balagopal 1988). I witnessed this personally in 2012 while accompanying a human rights organization on a fact-finding mission in the Agency: special forces killed two tribal farmers as they tended their cows early one morning, improbably believing they were armed Maoists coming to attack. The forces were not punished and the families were not compensated. They were not even allowed to have the bodies back.

The Maoist conflict was framed as a battle between development and underdevelopment by both state officials and guerilla ideologues alike. As India's powerful finance minister at the time, Palaniappan Chidambaram, argued in a 2009 interview, "Yes, we can allow the minerals to remain in the ground for another 10,000 years, but will that bring development to these people? Will that put shoes on their feet or their children in school?[13]" Even left-leaning intellectuals and

[13] From interview with Sahi, Ajit (2009). "Halt the Violence! Give me 72 hours." *Tehelka.* 21 November.

activists verge on fossilizing tribal culture, for instance by depicting the Maoist insurgency as a last stand of a simple, forest-dwelling people determined to preserve their way of life. “It’s basically Avatar,” one former Maoist party activist told me, referring, without irony, to James Cameron’s Hollywood blockbuster.

Within Andhra Pradesh, the Maoist were more or less defeated by the late 2000s as special forces pushed insurgents into the poorer bordering states. Accompanying the reduction in violence was a new policy consensus on the need for a “holistic” counterinsurgency strategy that combined aggressive security measures with aggressive “socioeconomic development activity” (Ministry of Home Affairs 2009; Ramakrishnan 2010; Planning Commission 2008). Billions of dollars were suddenly made available through the “Integrated Action Plan” and other measures to build roads, schools and hospitals in tribal districts, including Visakhapatnam – although, as Kennedy and Purushotham (2012) point out, this was a “disciplinary developmentalism” that sought to “expand the power that the state and other non-adivasi actors have over adivasi communities” in territories the Indian state previously struggled to control.

Entering the Field

My first visit to the Valley was on a balmy evening all the way back in 2012, when I was fresh out of NYU and hardly 23 years old. I had just moved to India after graduation on a generous “American Dream” fellowship to begin a journalism career covering international development. So I had returned to Visakhapatnam, a city I knew only through my mother’s recollections despite it being my place of birth. I sought stories about rural development and left-wing uprisings. I was fascinated in particular by the Maoist insurgency, which seemed to contradict received narratives about India’s economic growth “miracle” – including any I picked

up from my economics courses and my years of watching the country from afar.

As I was beginning to realize, what the Prime Minister now described as "the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country" had in fact simmered for decades in the same parts of northern Andhra Pradesh and Telangana from where my family hails (Kennedy and King 2013, Singh 2006). It wasn't just that "Naxalism" – an umbrella term for far-left rural insurgencies in India, including Maoism – had gone more or less unremarked in English-language media. I was also shocked to discover that in my own family of people who loved to remember to the old days, almost everyone had stories of Maoist encounters that they seldom ever shared: long walks in the forest ending in armed interrogations, surprise requests by former students turned guerilla fighters, former classmates who suddenly disappeared underground. These tales had to be gently coaxed from their tellers.

Eventually, inspired by dramatic accounts of Maoist country by writers like Arundhati Roy, I made the naïve and boyish calculation that the further I ventured into the country's most geographically isolated stretches, the heart of the "interior," the closer I could get to a pre-globalized world. So one evening in the spring of 2012, I finally climbed onto a groaning and garish public bus headed for Araku, and grabbed a seat next to hard-faced laborers whose pickaxes hung between their legs. Someone a couple rows ahead had smuggled several roosters concealed in a burlap sack on board, and was now trying in vain to silence his unruly birds – all the while attempting to avoid the conductor's icy glares. Our bus passed check post after check post on dark mountain roads, dreamy pop songs softly played on my headphones, and soon enough I began indulging thoughts that we were somehow crossing a veil into the timeless past. As darkness fell and the air cooled and the avian chaos unfurled around me, I looked out the window and witnessed a million stars.

It did not even take the length of the bus ride for these romantic misconceptions to become undone. The passengers traveling with me to the Agency may have been hardscrabble tribal peasants carrying live chickens and sacks of grain, but we all still lived in the same timeline. So when the bus pulled into Araku Valley station, and cell phones came back online, one of the pickaxe-carrying workers did what any 21st century man might do on his homeward-bound commute: he pulled out a Nokia and called his wife. Nearby, a giant billboard from the local tourism authority welcomed passengers to the Valley in English, the letters juxtaposing an image of two grinning, semi-nude women in heavy beads and complex facial piercings. The message was intended for me, not my tribal co-passengers, none of whom appeared to comfortably speak English. Nor, for that matter, did they dress anything like the women in the poster.

Without even realizing it, I had been drawing on centuries of imagery that created a sense of the tribal person as Indian society's 'other,' essentially static and fundamentally different to 'us.' The persistence of outdated narratives on Adivasis also aggravates the social, economic and political marginalization of tribal people; scheduled tribes are targets of policy decisions rather than participants in them. Virginius Xaxa, who is India's preeminent scholar of scheduled tribes, and other Indian social scientists have repeatedly called attention to how dominant state, cultural and social scientific perspectives on tribes have been shaped by centuries of often-contradictory colonial attitudes that regard Adivasis as inferior and exceptional, primitive and protected, but always at an earlier stage of human development than the rest of the country. Since at least the 18th century these attitudes have had real, negative consequences on members of tribes into the present day (Beteille 1986, Sundar 1998, Xaxa 1999, Xaxa 2005, Guha 2007, Shah 2010, Xaxa 2016, Das Gupta 2019).

Official Discrimination Against Tribes Today

Today, these attitudes are especially evident in discussions about what everyone called the Interior Places. "The Interior" was the semi-official term for the Agency's most remote, least developed parts of the whole Agency, which in 2012 still lay beyond the reach of commercial markets and government administration. These areas were often devoid of any state infrastructure save some neglected health clinics, a few fading PSAs against unsafe sex and child labor, and at best a single road that cut through nothing but forests and fields for miles on end. The Interior was also a place that still inspired near-mythical fear among the non-tribal businesspeople and government employees stationed in the Valley. Any outsider foolish enough to consider going there was guaranteed to hear multiple lectures warning them of the ominous perils that lay in wait: undrinkable water, venomous snakes, bandits, black magic and malaria that attacked the brain. For many non-tribal bureaucrats and officials, to be stationed here was considered a punishment post in a land "beyond the reach of law."

The Interior is also home to roughly 120,000 people, or 1 in 4 *girijans* living in Agency, belong to tribes still commonly known as PTGs, short for "Primitive Tribal Groups." These were the communities – now officially termed "PVTGs," for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups – that everyone could agree were the absolute worst off in the Agency, as both their former and current names imply. To the Indian state, PVTGs represented India's most 'backwards,' unassimilated, and underdeveloped groups – and thus the most difficult challenge to govern (Xaxa 2018). They lived further uphill, further away from the main roads, more nomadic, lacked water and basic necessities.

Despite official acknowledgements that the PVTGs were the "poorest of the poor" and, thus, deserved the greatest help, in practice local ITDA officials employed a markedly different tone

when they talked about PVTGs. An official at the ITDA Headquarters in Paderu, an Adivasi himself, dismissed the PVTGs as "uneducated people, no matter how many times we tell them to use nets, it doesn't enter their skulls. So what is even the point of driving for so many hours and coming home late at night, just to see them?" He was charged with ensuring adequate testing and treatment during a malaria outbreak.

A different official in Paderu, an upper-caste man sent from Hyderabad to implement a jobs training scheme, complained: "Only 5 years ago the government began a special focus on PTGs as a group. It is our first priority. Even now, 50% of the ITDA[14] budget is dedicated to mainstreaming PTGs. We provide them with 100% subsidy in every scheme. But PTGs are not interested in taking loans, or getting education. They don't have faith in government activities. They'll take ration cards, Aadhaar cards, and any entitlements we give them — but they won't engage with mainstream society."

The official sat back in his chair and shrugged resignedly. "They don't mix with other castes, they don't have assets, they just keep migrating to this day." He considered this for a moment. "Actually, wherever there is comfort and security, the candidates stay. We recently sent 350 tribals as industrial security guards, and got 190 of them to stay because food and boarding was provided."

[14] Short for Integrated Tribal Development Authority, the central government authority in every Agency district.



Fig 4: Jam packed streets during the annual Modakondamma Festival in Visakhapatnam Agency

Arrested Development

By the time I first arrived in Araku Valley in 2012, a new developmental paradigm had thoroughly infused all aspects of daily life and transformed the social landscape in an area that had long been emblematic of state neglect. The repeated use of the term "*real* development" called attention to the essential needs ostensibly being provided by the Indian state – healthcare, infrastructure and education – while at the same time, signifying some kind of a misunderstanding between the Agency and the outside world, some meaning lost in the space between the predominant developmental discourse and those voices on the ground.

Consider the following example from a field visit to a Kondh tribal village near Araku Valley in 2014. It was a lovely and well-kept settlement with electricity, a school and a shared toilet,

although the nearest road was a thirty-minute walk away. The villagers complained that although government officials would come to implement rural development schemes designed in the state capital – cattle insurance programs, financial incentives for the construction of concrete homes, even free satellite TV connections – the officials ignored their requests for better irrigation to enable them to plant an extra crop each year, or better road access so that they didn't have to physically carry their goods to the market. "They won't give us the things we really need," said Machiraju, the village head.

The gathered villagers differentiated between development they found useless – and forms of development, like education, they actually wanted and needed. "The state keeps thrusting on us useless schemes like insurance for our buffaloes," explained a young parent and farmer named Jayaraj, prompting peals of laughter from others gathered around us. "Finally they did something useful by building us that school." Everyone nodded in agreement. "Now, if only they would help us build irrigation canals so we could grow two crops a year instead of one, and a road so we wouldn't have to carry our goods to the market."

"We've always asked for the same thing: development that makes our lives easier," said Anil, a tribal college student I met on another occasion. "Real development means every village should have a road, electricity, drinking water, NREGS and jobs for the educated. The area should stay beautiful and every poor family should come up to a strong standard." He spoke so fast that he had to stop to catch his breath. "But when you people say development you don't mean that. You only mean getting rich off our land. Give us development that actually helps us."

The villagers in the Kondh tribe echoed Anil's sentiments: "Instead of so-called development programs no one wants, the government that recognizes and provides the development we keep asking for will always have this village's votes. Real development."

Said another: “Yes! The development we actually want and need.”

Development we want. Development we need. Real development. There it was again. I heard tribal people conceptualizing development in these terms again and again, across many years and many dozens of villages encompassing my fieldwork in the Agency. Those terms repeatedly signified a contrast with the predominant development model perceived to be promoted by the state, promising salvation through corporate tourism or big ticket mining projects, while calling attention to the same essential needs: healthcare, infrastructure and education.

Development and Tourism

This conflict of development vs. “real development” plays out in one of the largest industries affecting the agency: tourism. The Valley’s geographic and ecological riches inspire urban Indian visitors to imagine the forests and hills of the Eastern Ghats as a picturesque frontier, a foil to the heat, noise and pollution of the cities. Araku Valley, especially, is known as an affordable wintery escape for middle class Indians who lack the budget for Kashmir or the Swiss Alps. The vast majority arrive via the Vizag-Araku road or the rickety train that runs alongside it. Most Araku tourists never realize that those quaint, scenic routes to a holiday escape in fact originated as projects of imperial rule, built by foreign engineers to ship huge volumes of natural resources *out* of India – but an element of adventure is clearly part of the appeal. The young male tourists, in particular, like to race up the *ghat* road on their motorcycles with GoPro cameras strapped to their helmets, usually with a pillion passenger leaning luxuriantly into the cool mountain air.

Tourism in Araku is held up as a shining promise of “local development.” Nowadays, over 600,000 tourists pour into the Valley each year. Tourism has especially skyrocketed over the past decade, and incongruous new hotels have sprung up all along the ghats, offering campfires and

scenic views. It is the biggest industry in town, generating millions in revenue every year. It is also the area where most development efforts of the government are concentrated. The state government and its tourism board eagerly promote 'eco-tourism' in Araku Valley as "sustainable development" that can showcase tribal culture while generating income for tribal communities. In practice, however, the tourism industry is dominated by cronyism and non-tribal operators running lucrative ventures on illegally occupied tribal land (Reddy and Kumar 2010). The local communities of the Valley reap few benefits from the tourism boom, since outside businessmen own almost all of the hotels and tourist businesses. Most of these businesses operate illegally on protected tribal land, displacing the locals.

Instead, the local communities are part of the show. Predictably, local tourism is quick to capitalize on *Adivasi* culture, co-opted it as a romantic aesthetic invoking a timeless past. Billboards en route to Araku depict smiling Adivasi women, who are marked by elaborate piercings, facial tattoos and saris tied over bare shoulders. Hotels hire tribal dancers as entertainment for their guests, while vendors hawk bamboo chicken to tourists wanting to try "tribal food" (though it is not), as well as "tribal crafts" that are usually mass produced in an urban workshop. The Museum of Tribal Habitats is located in the center of town, next to the Tribal Coffee House and Museum (an establishment owned and operated by Brahmins). The South Indian movie industry frequently films on site in Adivasi hamlets, which can evoke a pristine and nostalgic village setting, even if upper-caste actors completely replace their actual inhabitants on film.

"Tourism is a gilded promise that just leads to a loss of tribal land," explained Surendra, a local activist I met at a 2016 tribal rights protest. "100 acres for a peacock park, another 'food park' apparently. But we have lots of wonderful food here in the agency. Why don't we get to

showcase that ourselves? People who have been displaced by tourism in the past don't even have room to go to the toilet now.

"We're not saying that all tourism is bad. Just give us contracts. Don't we have educated people among us? Can't we manage those things?"

Demanding Development

This notion of development schemes that are tribal-owned resonates throughout the Agency. Venkata Rao spent decades organizing tribal people to stand tall to authority and fearlessly defend their communities and rights. His nonprofit, Tribes for Education and Development (TED), frequently organizes community training programs in which he exhorts his tribal people to understand the laws that affect them – whether pertaining to land rights, water access or local governance – and make an active claim on the forms of development that are rightfully theirs. When I joined Venkata Rao on one of these occasions I was moved by his rhetorical elegance and his calls for tribal self-empowerment.

"What is our situation today? The world is running forward. Are we running backwards or forwards?"

Nods around the room, some people timidly muttering 'backwards.'

"There are all these schemes available for us," Venkata Rao said, as his colleague Kamayya listed all the tribal welfare programs on the chalkboard. "Are we even using them? They're all lying there unused! All this money has been sanctioned and is unused! If I offer you water, I won't pour it in your mouth. You have to come and take it from me." He lifted up a plastic cup filled with water. "Now who wants water? Come and get it."

Nobody stood up. Someone said something about all the government officials in charge of

the schemes being corrupt.

"They are corrupt because you never demand their services!" Venkata Rao exclaimed. "The government creates laws and schemes and leaves it among the people. Who needs to take them? The people. But you're all too afraid to take advantage."

An audience member recounted a story about how, in a PVTG village called Boinguda, some villagers tore down 16 huts, because they had heard that after doing so the government would come and build them new concrete houses. But to benefit from the Indira Gandhi housing project you needed to start building a concrete home first, show the receipt to officials, get reimbursed in cash, and then continue building the home on your own. These villagers simply tore their own homes down because no one had explained the proper procedure to receive the stipend first. They had operated on rumors, the man said, and now they were left with nothing.

"Who is the government?" Venkata Rao asked. He pointed to the blackboard. "The government is something that is the combination of everything we wrote today, plus me and you."

"Government, and all of its departments, work for us," he continued. "But what are we doing? We are folding our hands and bowing our heads. Should you listen to the MRO or should he listen to you?"

Conclusion

Eastern Ghats highlands like Araku Valley, then, are places where India's societal dramas of globalization and economic growth play out in full relief. Here is where the virtuous dream of national development is revealed for what it is: a project that is everywhere and always a project of social re-engineering – one that, like someone tearing down and rebuilding a house by

recycling the materials, seeks to redefine and reconfigure existing relational structures between people, places and cultures according to inherently political designs.

The tribal studies scholars bodhi and jojo argue that "it is difficult for Adivasi communities whose cultural practices have blurred with and are often indistinguishable from the oppressor's culture to negotiate towards the freedom end of the continuum [between freedom and control]. This is so because the prerequisite to seek any movement towards 'freedom' requires that the tribal community must first have and exhibit some distinctive socio-cultural traits which are historically constituted, socially shared in practice and politically articulated in power relations with other communities…While some speak of adaptation to new political structure dominated by *dikus* [non-tribals], others speak of challenging political dominance of 'non-tribal' society and for a few more, even of subtly oscillating between or surrendering to the political will of larger caste society" (bodhi and jojo 2019). What is posited as 'integration' by predominantly upper caste theorists is understood as a constant process of 'negotiating' one's place in a democratic set-up that imposes itself on Adivasi societies.

Adivasi farmers and educated Adivasi professionals alike employed the concept of "real development" to differentiate desirable forms of development worth participating in from state-endorsed forms of tribal development they regarded as exploitation by another name. Recall the Conference on the Limitations Facing Tribal Youth mentioned in the introduction. In the very health, education and economic development initiatives extended to India's tribal areas as an explicit effort at inclusive development, Murthy and his fellow *girijan* activists saw the same predatory nature they perceived in other projects of neoliberal development that brought private investment into tribal lands completed controlled by outsider businessmen, and demolished affirmative action for the poor in their rush to privatize public endeavors.

"Modi and Chandrababu Naidu want to make it impossible for us to get government jobs," said Murthy, referring to the Indian prime minister and Andhra Pradesh chief minister, both supporters of neoliberal policies. "You can't get good work in the private sector, and what little government jobs there are will all go. Can you get a job without a reservation? No. Then you need to rely on getting recommendations [from local authorities] in order to be placed. But who will get a recommendation? Only the corrupt, the devious."

This prompted Gori Naik, an NGO worker from Odisha, to chime in. "Our coffee plantations produce beans consumed worldwide, but [tribal farmers] lose out on even the processing money eaten up by middlemen and forest officials. The millets we grow have become a luxury health food for the rich, but we sell them all for low rates instead of eating them ourselves or processing it here."

"Real development," by contrast, represented visions of a future where Adivasis directly benefited off of the fruits of their land and labor. "We don't want Amaravathi development," he concluded to applause, derogatorily referring to Chandrababu Naidu's spectacularly failed attempt to build a Singapore-like smart city in the fertile Krishna River delta (Nemana 2014). "We want *real* development! Only by working together will we ever ensure it for ourselves."

Rather than having any one 'objective' meaning, here "development" constitutes *a struggle over defining the terms of differentiation and progress* between, on the one hand, state and capitalist plans for the future of tribal people and tribal lands, and on the other, the ground-level aspirations of those being developed. We will thus need to ask how Adivasis grapple with the development paradigm – and how they either subvert or acquiesce to the roles laid out for them in the national drama.

Chapter 2
Finally, "Real Development": The Social Meanings of Formal Education in the Valley

> It is an absolute wonder and an overwhelming witness to the power of the human spirit that any black person in this country has managed to become, in any way whatever, educated. The miracle is that some have stepped out of the rags of the Republic's definitions to assume the great burden and glory of their humanity and of their responsibility for one another.
>
> -- *James Baldwin, "Dark Days,"* Esquire *(1980)*

Introduction

The school was a two-room concrete building, very plain but in decent shape. Portraits of freedom fighters adorned the walls, along with hand-painted Telugu messages promoting the value of learning, slogans like "EDUCATION IS PROSPERITY." It had been built less than five years ago to provide free elementary education to children from the tribal *panchayat* – or village division – of Jankaravalasa and its surrounding hamlets.

"Vivek, have you been paying attention? Look how quickly we arrived here!" exclaimed Ratnam Das, the Tribal Educational Rural Development Society employee who took me to Jankaravalasa that day. His enthusiasm pertained to the fact that it had taken us less than one minute to walk from the main village to the school. "In fact we hardly ever left the village at all."

"I see," I said, perplexed. "Err, what of it?" Many Indian villages contained primary schools, and the fact that Jankaravalasa had one too did not register as especially noteworthy to me.

"Before they built this, you know how far kids had to walk?" Ratnam replied. "Seven kilometers. That's how far the nearest school was. The parents all have to be in the fields by dawn, so they sent even their smallest children off to school by themselves."

A growing number of villages in Araku Valley were becoming connected by road, allowing vehicles to transport children to school and goods to the market (not to mention the occasional

squadron of counterinsurgency police on patrol). But Jankaravalasa remained one of the hundreds of settlements still accessible only by foot. For a child to walk 7 kilometers over steep, hilly terrain – both ways – to school each day was no small feat.

"At that age, children get easily distracted," as Ratnam put it. "But if the school is miles away, parents didn't know if they actually went to class or spent the day playing off in a field. Their kids will come home and say they went to school and were taught so and so lesson. But since none of the adults could read, there was no verifying if that was actually true or not."

Ratnam was a stout, pot-bellied tribal man in his early 30s. He liked to pose for photos with his golf cap stylishly cocked, and walked with a distinctive swagger, swaying his body and gently rocking his head with each step. His duties as a field officer with Venkata Rao's NGO involved routine visits to tribal villages across the Visakhapatnam Agency – many of them in "interior places" accessible only on foot – to inform those communities of their legal entitlements to a wide range of rural development schemes, and assist in their implementation.

It was December 2012 and I was still very green to the ways of the Agency. I was just discovering that the Valley's substantial population of Christians celebrated Christmas for an entire month. For the whole of December, the hills of Araku Valley had rung with the music of *Adivasi* gospel choirs, whose songs reverberated from loudspeakers outside tiny village churches. I had also learned that as a rule, the "least developed" villages on Ratnam's rounds, like Jankaravalasa, were the most isolated from everything else. And usually they fell in a socio-economic category known as *Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups* (PVTG).

Even by tribal living standards, the semi-nomadic communities known as PVTGs were the poorest of the poor. They lived in the highest parts of the Ghats, farthest from roads and the reaches of the state, depending mainly on what they could grow or forage from the mountains.

Their settlements accordingly lacked water and basic necessities – and often did not even exist in official records. Ratnam, who was PVTG himself, had brought me to Jankaravalasa because he wanted me to see the effect a local school had on a PVTG community such as theirs.

"A lot of people think PVTGs don't care about education, or don't want development, but that isn't true," he said. "Of course we all *want* our kids in school like anybody else – it just wasn't feasible before."

Ratnam pointed to a line of houses some 25 yards away from the school, on the opposite end of a small, well-swept square. "See how the building is part of the village, allowing the whole community to get involved? Now when they drop them off in the morning and tell them to study hard, parents can rest assured their children are actually in school and being fed."

As they say, it takes a village to raise a child. The same could also be said about raising a good student. Even if most children's parents spend the day away on farms or wage work, elderly villagers who remained at home could keep a watch on any missing students – or any missing school lunches served free each day through the mid-day meal program.[15]

Background: India's Mass Education Revolution

Novel opportunities to pursue education in tribal areas came on the heels of vast achievements in literacy and schooling nationwide – thanks to which children are attending

[15] First rolled out in 1995, India's midday meals program now serves over 120 million children in over 1.27 million schools – the largest of its kind in the world, widely credited for improving school attendance and improving child nutrition in marginalized communities. The program is centrally funded but locally run, allowing flexibility in procurement and parental involvement when things go wrong. I saw this in action at several Valley schools as I sat with children for a freshly cooked lunch of egg curry and rice. The rice came from the public distribution system, while the eggs and vegetables were procured from local farmers – and more than once a community member stopped by to ensure that the children were being properly fed.

school, and remaining there, at rates that were inconceivable as late as the 1980s. By many accounts, educational expansion in India was nothing short of a revolution – a sea change in a country where as late as the 1990s, illiteracy was perceived as endemic, and mass education nothing short of a developmental 'holy grail' (Kaunda 1969; Ayyar 2016).

Modern schooling in India originated in 19th-century British efforts to train an elite cadre of native officers to run the colonial administration; given a British education in India, this new ruling class would be, in the words of Lord Thomas Macaulay, "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Subramaniam 2019). Although Indian social reformers attempted to reverse this legacy, formal education remained the preserve of an upper-caste, urban, male elite for most of the 20th century. Secondary and tertiary school enrollment rates did not exceed 30% and 5% respectively until the 1980s (World Bank 2020).

The vast majority of Indian children, meanwhile, learned as they had for generations – through informal apprenticeships in caste-based occupations that were mediated via local kinship networks. Even after independence from British colonial rule, the social reproduction of traditional caste-based occupations – even among communities famed for their artisan skills and craft – tethered successive generations to their place in the social structure, so long as social mobility through formal schooling remained out of reach (Balagopal 1990).

But access to education picked up dramatically in the 1990s, following a series of landmark reforms – in 1986, 1990, and 2009 – which respectively introduced universal primary education, admissions quotas for underrepresented groups in public education, and mandatory school attendance for all children until the age of 14.[16] These reforms included the 1986 NPE (equal

[16] The 1990 Mandal Commission report reserved a proportionate share in all public undertakings to Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backwards Classes (OBCs) – an amalgamation of historically lowered castes who altogether comprise nearly 75% of India's population.

opportunities for women and SC/STs in education), the 1990 implementation of the Mandal commission report (expanded reservations for oppressed castes in higher education and government jobs), and finally the 2002 Right to Education Amendment followed by the 2009 Right to Education Act (free and compulsory education for children 6-14).

The Right to Education Act in particular made it mandatory for the government to provide free and compulsory education to children between the ages of 6 to 14, and provided funds for the construction of schools to ensure every child lived within 5 kilometers of a free public elementary school (Pankaj et al. 2021). These reforms were accompanied by massive efforts by the Indian government and global development organizations to build new schools, improve existing facilities and incentivize school attendance through mid-day meals and greater community involvement (Jain et al. 2018, Singh 2002, Majumdar 2009).

By 2007, India had reached universal enrollment in primary education for all children, an educational milestone that, not long before, few believed even possible for such a poor and populous country. This remarkable achievement that meant every one of country's hundreds of millions of primary school-aged children was not only being sent to school, but also that a free public school within walking distance where they could actually attend. Arguably the single biggest driving factor was the rapid construction of elementary and second schools after 2002, with a special focus on reaching the country's most underserved communities like Jankaravalasa. By 2017, there were over 1.5 million schools in India with total enrollments approaching *251 million students* in Grades 1-12 (UDISE+ 2021-22). While government schools do suffer from teacher absenteeism and mismanagement, and have been abandoned in favor of private schools by the country's well-to-do, they are nonetheless *the* reason why so many marginalized children are finally in school – almost 1.1 million schools in 2017 were public or charter institutes

providing free education and meals to 160 million students (*ibid*).

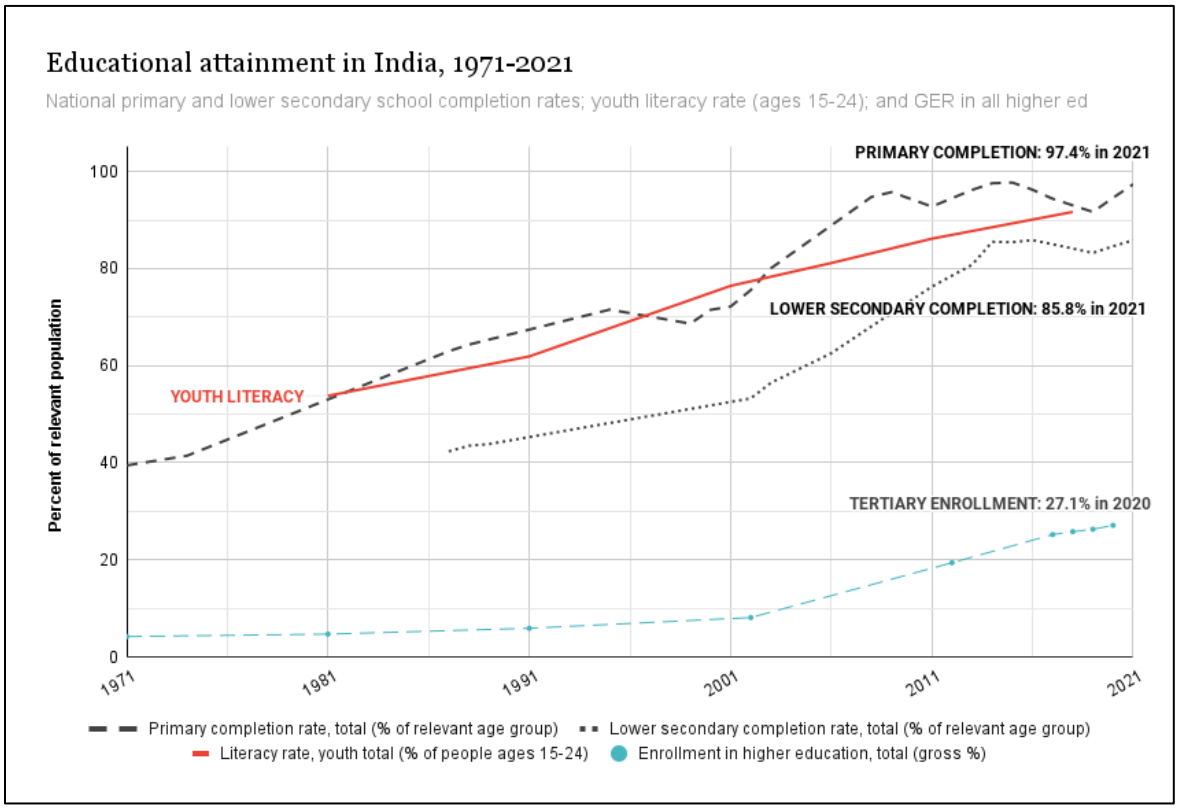


Fig. 1: Primary and lower secondary education completion as well as tertiary enrollment rates in India between 1971-2021. (Source: World Bank 2023)

Within a decade, India's quest for the 'holy grail' of universal education crossed another landmark when nearly every child was not only attending but *completing* elementary, with over 80% continuing on to graduate from high school as well[17] (Fig. 2; see also Acharya 1994, Ayyar 2016). Adult literacy levels likewise rose from 34% in 1971 to 74% by 2011, driven by the major expansions in literacy and schooling among the country's huge cohorts of newly-maturing young adults (Census of India 2011).

[17] 'High school' in India follows the old British lower secondary tradition of beginning in 6th grade and finishing at 10th, followed by two years of 'intermediate' or 'junior college', after which students are permitted to enter into university or other tertiary degree programs.

Making Sense of India's Universal Education Experiment

It is important to note that these successes continued to be plagued by school infrastructure, high dropout rates and uneven learning outcomes and that the achievement of truly universal education in India remains a work in progress (ASER 2022; Mehta 2023). In the English-speaking policy world that intersected around global development goals and the Indian education system, it is taken for granted that rural public schools like the one in Jankaravalasa were problematic, to say the least. A nation-wide assessment of Indian fifth graders by the NGO Pratham found that just 42.8% could read a simple Grade II-level story in their regional language, and just 25.6% could divide a 3-digit number by a single digit; fewer still, or specifically 24.5%, knew how to read a simple sentence in English (ASER 2022).

Curiously, among those who cared most deeply about education policy in India, the problem of poor learning outcomes quickly eclipsed any celebrations over the success of universal education. In 2022, I met with an old friend who worked at an education policy think tank in Hyderabad, which was funded by a venture capital billionaire and employed graduates of elite universities in the style of sleek American policy nonprofits. It was a reunion after many years, since the last time I properly saw Shruti was when she came up to Araku back in 2015. Her job involved directly advising the Telangana government on the Telugu curriculum, although she was on her way out and was waiting to hear back from a number of Sociology PhD programs in the States. Previously she had worked for the NGO Pratham in Delhi, in an "eye-opening" role that required her some 200 villages as a surveyor for their Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) — the gold standard in Indian education policy for assessing how much learning was happening in the country's 1.5 million schools. I was excited to talk to her because she had been

getting her hands dirty with education policy in India for many years now, and her work with ASER made her especially well-positioned to comment on whether India's experiment in universal education was working or not.

I asked Shruti what people in her world had to say about the fact that in recent decades India indeed seems to have accomplished the simple goal of enrolling every child in school – a centuries-old dream which even 25 years ago seemed all but impossible, even though it was enshrined in the constitution and considered a critical marker of Indian progress. Now, not only were 97% of all Indian children *finishing* primary school, but 86% completed lower secondary (10th grade) as well as of 2021. I thought of my friends in Araku, and all the other children in India from communities historically excluded from education – who seized the chance at schooling when it finally arrived. Wasn't this, in some way, a revolution by the marginalized – precisely the sort of momentous social change Jyotirao Phule had yearned for in *Gulamgiri* a century and a half ago (Phule 1873)? I remarked on how strange it seemed to me, as an outsider to all of this, that the momentous occasion of universal schooling – of the overcoming of literacy as a fundamental social barrier – had passed with such little comment from Indian policy wonks, much less the celebration I believed it deserved.

Shruti said that there were indeed some people who said universal enrollment had been achieved and it was enough to leave it at that. But she and others believed that such benchmarks meant little so long as children weren't actually learning. Even in Telangana, the data apparently said that as many as 60% of 7th and 8th class children were functionally illiterate. They couldn't read the most basic passages shown to them or reason through the most basic arithmetic. Many parents were still sending their children to school for the purpose of a midday meal and little else. Moreover, primary school enrollment rates – which had exceeded 99% pre-pandemic – had

not recovered from their prolonged erosion during the Covid-19 pandemic. So she herself felt there was little to celebrate.

It is hard to argue with this perspective, given the volume of clear evidence backing it. The most serious thinkers on Indian education have all pointed out the dramatic failures in quality learning (e.g. Kremer et al. 2005; Muralidharan and Sundararaman 2011). There was no pretending that this wasn't a serious problem, and moreover one that worst affected the most disadvantaged students in society. Pratham's 2018 ASER survey, for instance, found that only 42% of Class III students in Karnataka could read and 78% had basic numeracy (these numbers, like everywhere else, dropped considerably after the Covid-19 lockdown). With her genuine concern for whether Indian children were actually learning, my friend looked to the data and rightly saw an education system in need of serious repair, whose outcomes lagged far behind not only the developed world but many developing nations too.



Fig. 2: Two PVTG boys standing in their derelict public schoolhouse in interior Araku Valley.

But insofar as education is also a means of social and economic transformation – which is to say a process through which Indian people might improve their social and material well-being, leading to a transformation of the social structure as a whole – this pessimistic perspective overlooks two developments of immense sociological significance. First, the very idea that *all* children under a certain age *ought* to be in school has become the norm across India. This was not the case until very recently. Over half of all Indian schoolchildren have a parent who did not attend school at all, and another 15% have parents who did not continue after primary school (ASER 2018). Acharya (1994), for instance, found that agricultural laborers in West Bengal would not send their children to school, fearing that landlords would refuse to hire workers who even had an elementary education.

Second, however alarming contemporary learning data like those compiled by ASER are,

they still represent a vast improvement from any benchmarks taken a generation ago. For instance, a case study on education quality in Madhya Pradesh from 1993 found that only 10 percent of elementary school children tested acquired basic competency in Hindi and only 5 percent did so in math after five years (Acharya 1993). Literacy and numeracy rates were highest in the most developed, urban centers and plummeted in the most rural districts furthest away. Not represented in these already dismal figures, ironically, were 50% of school-aged children who had already dropped out of elementary school, or never enrolled at all.

Since then, Madhya Pradesh has remained one of the worst performing Indian states in terms of student achievement. Nevertheless, comparable estimates by the 2022 ASER survey find 53 percent of fifth graders had basic competency in Hindi and 19 percent in math in rural Madhya Pradesh alone – where 98 percent of its current 16 million school-going children are enrolled (ASER 2022, Batra et al. 2022). Assuming Acharya's 1993 figures can be reasonably compared with ASER's in 2022, this means not only that twice as many children were now attending school in rural Madhya Pradesh, but also that their test scores improved by a factor of four.

The previous paragraphs lay out some standard measures about primary schools in Madhya Pradesh, which on the one hand show it to be one of the worst Indian states for childhood education. On the other hand, seen across time the same data suggests children in Madhya Pradesh are not only twice as likely to be enrolled in school compared to the 90s, but they also appear to be *learning* far more effectively in the primary schools they universally complete today. While there remained much room for improvement, Indian children were clearly more likely to attend school *and* learning better than they had in the recent past.

It is quite striking, then, that progressive policy experts like Shruti understood the universalization of education as rendered moot by low learning levels, while people in Araku

tended to emphasize the historic significance of even having schools *at all*, despite how poorly they compared to privileged city schools.

"Real Development": The Social Meaning of Education in Araku Valley

In Jankaravalasa, we appeared to be standing before yet another underfunded and likely dysfunctional rural Indian government school. Hardly anybody in the Valley contested the poor state of the Agency's schools, which everyone knew fared even worse than the generally dismal standards of Indian public education. To them, poor standards in education were simply another predictable feature of being underdeveloped – but that did not preclude real learning from taking place.

How Education is Experienced

At the time of our visit, the Jankaravalasa Primary School had a roster of 25 students and one teacher. The 25 or so students ranged from ages 4 to 10, from very small kindergarteners to much taller 5th graders. Their teacher was a young local man named Swaminaidu, who at the moment was not officially employed as a government teacher at all. He was a substitute hired on a temporary, contractual basis to assist the school's regular head instructor[18].

Although contractors earned a fraction of what head teachers made, Swaminaidu was thrilled to have a regular income as well as a seasoned mentor who promised to hone his teaching skills and help him find a more permanent role. But one month prior to our arrival his boss had

[18] A formidable woman named Raj Kumari who, I was told, dressed in impeccably starched saris and terrified even the toughest men of the village with a single glare.

abruptly taken a long sabbatical, leaving him to be the school's only instructor for at least the coming year. Although he was not prepared for it, Swaminaidu now shouldered the responsibility of teaching all 25 students for the remainder of the school year. I asked him how he planned to teach children of five grade levels at the same time. Was it possible to simultaneously cover their five different syllabi?

"One section each day of the week, starting at most advanced," he said. "So on Mondays I cover the 5th standard syllabus, 4th standard on Tuesdays and so on. Since today's a Saturday it was the kindergarteners' turn. The children sit through every lesson, whether or not they understand it or have heard it before. They want to be here. My hope is that eventually, through repetition, they learn enough to manage once they leave for hostel [to attend high school]."

After a pause, he added, "Someone has to do it – someone has to educate them."



Fig. 3: Swaminaidu (left) and Ratnam Das (right) play a teaching game with the students of

Jankaravalasa Primary School.

Looking at the children seated on the floor, I could not shake a sinking feeling that his efforts were futile. How could they ever compete with the cutthroat competition of the outside world? The main teacher's long absence, the ill-fitting uniforms, the five grades being taught at the same time: everything about today felt like the hallmarks of abject educational failure. Swaminaidu must have noticed my dismay, because he put down his cards and turned to face us. His soft voice and gentle demeanor instantly cut away the tension in the room.

"Vivek," he said gently. "I know this may not look very good to an educated city person like you. But you have to understand, it is still better than what we used to have in the Agency."

In instinctively focusing on all that had gone *wrong* here, I'd forgotten Ratnam's point on the way over: that before this little schoolhouse was built, the nearest primary school was so far away that it was as good as not having one at all.

"Forget about *bad* schools. Until very recently, there were barely any schools at all around here. Not enough, anyways."

"And especially not for PVTGs," added Ratnam, as Swaminaidu nodded with a sad smile.

But now they had their school.

Conclusion

Early in the course of my fieldwork in Araku Valley, the visit to Jankaravalasa provided a striking illustration of what would become the single most surprising finding from my research into the social meaning of inclusive development: that tribal people's motives to enthusiastically participate in specific development initiatives were not reducible to outcomes alone – at least not the outcomes experts most cared about. Ratnam and Swaminaidu were making the assertion that

the real significance of universal public education lay not in student performance but in the very fact that they had schools at all. This was because schools like Jankaravalasa Primary still functioned as springboards for collective actions and imaginations that were impossible before. By its very existence, the Jankaravalasa Primary School made it possible to say "someone has to educate them," and then attempt it.

Seen this way, education expansion in Araku Valley was a form – in fact, as I argue in the following chapter, *the* form – of "development we actually want." Primary and secondary schooling was finally made feasible through recent central government acts like RTE and IAP, and then embraced with enthusiasm throughout the Visakhapatnam Agency, where thousands of poor Adivasi families began to ensure their children not only completed high school but continued onto college as well. If the last chapter was about state-tribal conflicts over what development actually means, it was impossible to ignore the way tribal people in the Agency seemed to universally rally around the specific form of development that is education. Where development is a contentious facet of social life, organized around various contested meanings largely putting tribal people against the state, outsiders, and conventional wisdom, education in the Valley was a striking departure in terms of the sheer enthusiasm with which a state-funded development program was pursued.

Chapter 3
Through the Veil of Higher Education

> 'Freedom' is imperative to men, and it is the duty of every human to bestow this freedom on those who are deprived of it. When a person is free, they are able to express their innermost thoughts orally or in writing to others.
>
> -- *Jyotirao Phule, Preface to* Gulamgiri [‘Slavery’] *(1873)*

Going Higher

Accompanying the near-universalization of primary and secondary education in India was an even steeper acceleration of higher education, facilitated by infusions of new state and private sector investment at the turn of the new century. In the years following independence from British rule in 1947, less than half of 1 percent of college-aged Indians were enrolled in any form of higher education at all – a mere 200,000 students scattered across a few hundred colleges and universities in a country then home to 347 million people. Between 2001 and 2021, the number of colleges and universities in India quadrupled to nearly 44,000, while total tertiary enrollment likewise quadrupled from 8.1% in 2001 to 31.3% by 2021 (Fig. 1).

Over this period, in other words, roughly five new colleges were established in India every *day* in order to accommodate the 1.5 million additional enrollments each year (Brookings 2019). Nearly 40 percent of the 580 million Indians under the age of 25 already have or will enroll in some form of higher education – a tectonic shift from the situation just 30 years prior, when hardly 40 percent of all Indian students would even pass the 10th grade (World Bank 2020). The significance of this transformation is further underscored by the fact that tertiary enrollment levels in the United Kingdom, the former center of the British Empire, did not reach equivalent levels until the early *1990s* (Bolton 2025).

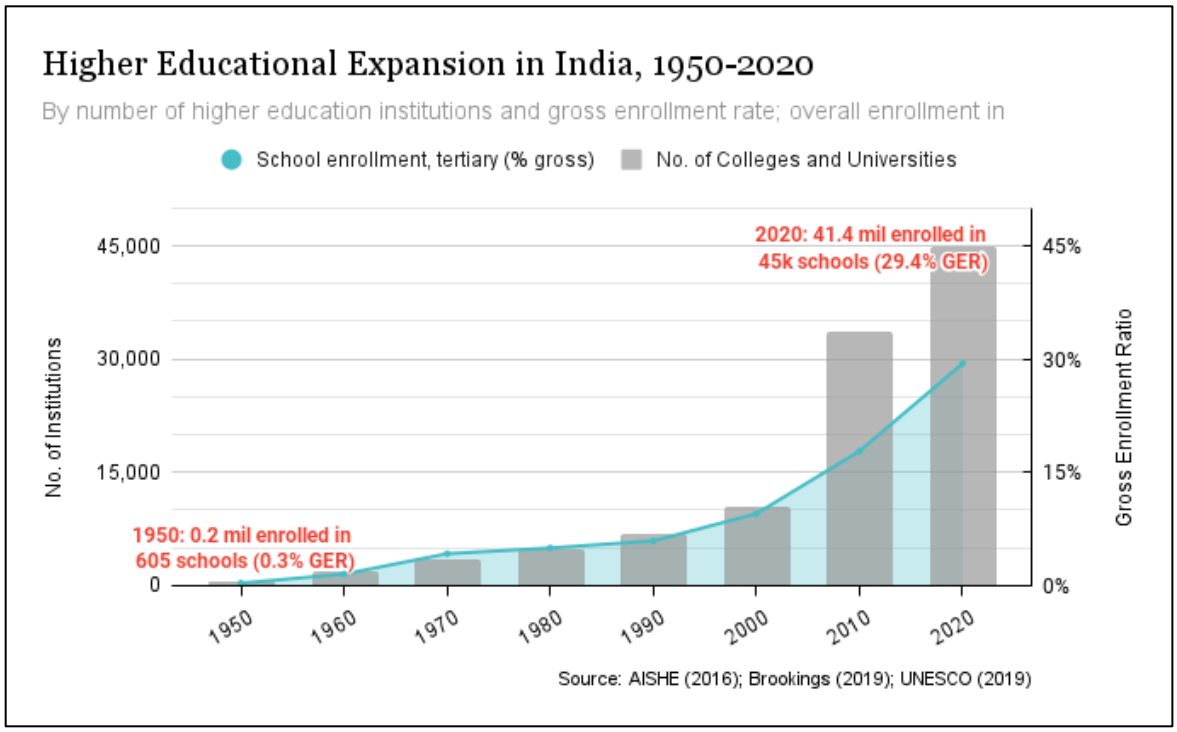


Fig. 1: Tertiary education in India over time. Columns depict the national total of accredited higher education institutes (left axis). The blue line indicates the gross enrollment rates in higher education (right axis). Higher education in India now encompasses some 45,000 institutes and 30% of college-aged adults. (Source: AISHE 2016; Brookings 2019; UNESCO 2019)

The rapid expansion of formal education at all levels, while not without its problems, signaled a major transformation in the social fabric of work and aspiration. One periodic survey found that while 13% of 15-34 year olds listed their main occupation as 'student' in 2007, fully 32% did so in 2017 – an astonishing 19 percentage point increase in just 10 years (CSDS-KAS 2017). Most of this growth came from first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds: over half of all schoolchildren have a parent who did not attend school at all, and another 15% have parents who did not continue after primary school (ASER 2014). The statistics belied immensely poignant tales of families financing their children's schooling against lands, businesses or means of production owned by their families for generations. They were in effect placing all their bets on the idea that by becoming an "educated person," their child could land a "good job" in the new economy that would help them finally break the cycle of intergenerational

poverty.

It was doubly significant that the students fueling new enrollments at all levels came from historically underrepresented groups in Indian education: women, scheduled castes or tribes, Muslims and rural communities. Logically, it had to be this way given that altogether those categories comprise an overwhelming majority of India's population, estimated to be as high at 80-90%.[19] Nevertheless, the social reproduction of India's caste system, in particular, has historically depended on the denial of schooling and even basic literacy to lower-caste men and women, tethering individuals to the occupational strata of their birth (Phule 1885, Ambedkar 1936, Devy 2002). More than just an economic investment, education held the promise of escape from the intergenerational cycle of caste reproduction at last, and towards social mobility in the modern economy.

Understanding Education as 'Real Development'

Chapter 1 reviewed how Adivasis in Araku Valley differentiated "real development" from other forms of tribal development projects on offer from state and non-state actors. Unlike mining and certain forms of tourism, which tribal people understood as exploitation by another name, "real development" referred to public works seen as genuinely beneficial in helping tribal communities overcome their relative disadvantages. In Chapter 2, I argued how education represented "real development" for reasons that were often lost in public policy debates over schooling. Even if tribal schools suffered from low standards, far more important was the fact that they now existed in the first place. Schools were considered "real development" because, in

[19] The measurement of caste in India is complex and controversial. Pew reports that some 70% of Indians belong to a lower caste category (Starr and Sahgal 2021), while the partially-released official caste census found disadvantaged castes comprised 84% of the population in Bihar (Chandrasekhar 2024).

places where illiteracy is a defining feature of social vulnerability, simply sending your child to school was an act enabling new forms of social action and mobility.

Semi-structured interviews with Adivasi youth in Araku Valley reveal the way many approached education as a transformative experience of "real development." Life history accounts, in particular, help us analyze this experience of education at the break of modernity (Giddens 1991). Drawing on past studies of youth culture (Silva 2012, Frye 2012), I assembled an interview schedule focusing on life histories and aspirations and interviewed young Adivasi men and women who either had pursued or were pursuing some form of higher education. The interviews were conducted in Araku Valley on separate field visits in late 2022 and 2023, but asked respondents to reflect on their experiences beginning from early childhood as well on the life histories of their parents. I structured my interviews around such "generational" accounts for two reasons in particular.

First, virtually all of my young Adivasi respondents were raised by tribal farmers who themselves attended a few years of primary school at most, and often never attended at all. This older generation came of age at a time when the entire Vishakhapatnam Agency had fewer than 10 high schools (only half of which were public) for the education of its entire population; their combined student bodies were unlikely to exceed 5,000 at full capacity – which would have left as many as 100,000 school-aged children completely unserved. Primary schools were better available but still sporadic enough that most students walked for miles each way, if they went at all. Until the turn of the 21st century, asphalt roads in the Agency could be still counted on one hand; money was primarily used only to buy salt and a yearly set of clothes; electricity, concrete and even cooking gas were luxuries of life in towns. Most people lived in tiny hamlets of earthen homes that, lacking gas or electricity, entirely relied on the sun for light and firewood for fuel.

Prior to 2005, moreover, much of the Agency was considered hostile territory under Maoist control. Fearing kidnapping or worse, street-level bureaucrats all but abandoned places like Jankaravalasa which lay beyond the immediate vicinity of main roads. As a result, my respondents' parents were the products of an Agency where all culture was oral and the transmission of ideas occurred mostly at the pace of walking. The parents' generation had spent their lives learning Adivasi traditions of cooperative agriculture and survival in the Eastern Ghats: efficiently tilling tough soil, identifying useful forest products, timing the monsoon correctly, avoiding hazardous plants and animals, and so on.

Functional illiteracy nonetheless condemned this previous generation to the mercy of businessmen and state officials alike, especially as economic development penetrated the 'backwards' tribal regions at last. They found themselves unable to negotiate fair terms or assert their legal rights. They could not speak the bureaucratic language of development. Their oral traditions and practical knowledges did not easily translate into the textual world, nor its implicit hierarchies for valuing property and people. To my respondents' parents, the state must have seemed an ambivalent presence in an immense and unknowable world, too often absent in terms of aiding their lives, yet too often present for impinging on them.

Second, universal education may have started with putting children in primary schools, but it seldom ended there. Now that their children were guaranteed a seat in school, tribal families around Araku Valley pushed to hard keep them there. Literacy rates in the Visakhapatnam Agency rose from 34% in 2001 to 49% in 2016, with female literacy nearly doubling from 23% to 41% (Reddy 2020). In 2001, enrollment in high school remained in the single digits for both tribal men and women. By 2016, gross enrollment ratios for scheduled tribes across AP hit 99% in primary school and 66% in secondary. Not only were most young adivasis now successfully

completing secondary schooling, but many also went on to pursue higher education at the graduate and even postgraduate level – often at great expense to their families. Between 2014 to 2019, GERs of scheduled tribes in higher education rose from 20.5% to 26.5% for men and 23% to 30.4% for women. In other words, the share of adivasi women attending college in 2019 was significantly higher than the share who even knew how to read just two decades earlier (Radhika 2014; Reddy 2020; Kishore and Babu 2023).

The following sections contain results from 31 semi-structured interviews with young educated Adivasi men and women (13 women, 18 men) between the ages of 19 and 34. All of them were hoping to use education to land jobs that would help them escape poverty. The accounts they offered were less concerned with what benefits education would bring than with the conviction that not being educated guaranteed one's poverty and political powerlessness. The results describe three major themes of their accounts: 1) education as a way of intergenerational mobility; 2) education as a way of developing social knowledge; and 3) education as a way to secure formal economy jobs.

Education and Parental Sacrifice

One of the most striking features of the interviews was the extent to which parents featured in respondents' accounts of their educational experiences. The vast majority of my respondents relationally anchored their dreams and motivations for their education to tales of heroic parental sacrifice: the parents who went hungry so their school-going children could eat, the mother who braved arrest just to earn money to pay for school fees (Auyero and Swistun 2008). Moreover, respondents specifically depicted their parents as intimately present in education even while symbolically identifying them with conditions they sought to escape. Contrary to certain

stereotypical representations of poor Indian parents as absent or clueless in their children's education, here they are part and parcel of a multi-generational effort to transform the conditions of the present day.

The historically charged relationship between illiteracy and extreme poverty in India illuminates the deeply personal motives Adivasi youth provide to explain their commitment to education. Esu (male, age 25) described witnessing his mother's arrest when he was a child. A daily wage laborer and the sole breadwinner in her family, she raised money for his education by selling *saara* (a traditional adivasi liquor) at the local market alongside a few other tribal women. One day, Revenue Department officials raided the market, smashed their jars, beat the women, then dragged them all to jail – an experience, he says, "that opened my eyes":

> *Esu*: So the police once took my mother away to jail. They arrested everyone selling *saara*. So it occurred to me then, *why are our lives this away? Must we do this in order to survive? If this life keeps up we will lose everything. There has to be something else we could do. So what to do?*
>
> That's when I knew I had to put in the work. One way or another I had to come up in life. I was inspired that day. I mean at least I had to do it. My father became an alcoholic. My mother works hard but is uneducated. It was very hard to support an entire family on her earnings alone. I saw that in my mother. I saw her struggles every day.

I was astonished to learn what the charges were: selling liquor without paying any taxes. Taxes. That was the crime of an Adivasi woman who had gone most of her life without education, healthcare, or even so much as an asphalt road laid by the state. The immense dignity of Esu's mother shows the value many Adivasi families placed on education. Somehow, an uneducated tribal woman, providing for a whole family on less than 200 rupees ($2.50) per day earned at great difficulty and risk, nonetheless managed to put both her son and daughter through higher education. But the real analytical significance of this story is the effect it has on Esu, now a post-graduate working for a non-profit in Araku Valley: a transformative experience that opened his eyes to the true extent of his family's precarious position. It served to clarify

academic success as the focus of his own personal identity, providing the contrasting element against which hard work in education could provide a way out.

For Esu, such a tale goes beyond what Mills termed "vocabularies of motive" (Mills 1940). One of the characteristic features of "late modernity", as Giddens argues, is the production of an individual's identity through their "reflexive biographies" of the self (Giddens 1991). Until the late modern turn, stable social identities – say, that of an Adivasi sustenance farmer in interior Araku Valley – were largely shaped by forces perceived to be far larger than us and well beyond our control, like god and nature. Identity today, however, is constituted through a more logocentric process: individuals construct "narrative odysseys" (Frye 2012) of their lives that, while indeed based on shared and familiar cultural models, nevertheless ascribe unique meanings to their experiences and circumstances by "continually integrat[ing] events that occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self" (Giddens 1991, p. 54).

In Esu's tale about his mother's arrest, we see a traumatic experience that encapsulates the structural violence inflicted on tribes – the sale of a traditional Adivasi beverage at a traditional Adivasi market leading directly to a mother's arrest – invoked at the moment of a son's attempted departure from that very world, providing him with a *raison d'être*. In this way, Esu's mother simultaneously represents both his inspiring source of motivation and, through her experiences, the living embodiment of everything he must work hard to escape:

> *Esu*: Seeing my mother was my main inspiration actually. Because she worked very hard every day and spent all her earnings on me. Until I finished my [undergraduate degree] it was my mother who financially supported me. I had no support from the outside. So seeing her is why I work hard.
>
> She would tell me a saying: *The god who plants the seeds will not stop without watering it too. He will water the sapling to ensure it survives. If we keep striving, then a day will come when we too will rise. We just have to keep looking forward to that day.*
>
> Since then I was able to do everything on my own. I didn't need to depend on anybody.

In the Valley I heard dozens of similar stories from grateful children about mothers just like

her. But Esu also knew that the outside world did not think his mother worthy of even a fraction of the respect and admiration he had for her. And therein lies the contradiction. Education was the only way for Esu, as a young man growing up in the Visakhapatnam Agency, to not only find a way out of poverty, but even to have some degree of confidence that the world would respect his humanity – and by extension, those of his loved ones. His mother had struggled to educate him so he would not end up like *her* – a sentiment also expressed by Devi (female, age 20):

Vivek: So did the adults in your house encourage your education?

Devi: Very much.

Vivek: What did they tell you?

Devi: They said "you must study hard, you should have a bright future, *you'll have a future only if you study hard, if you don't have an education you will end up like us,* with only farming left." Since mummy couldn't study past 5th grade, she tells me to continue my studies. She said, "Even if we don't have any money I'll ask for money from this person and that, but I won't stop your education."

Devi, a nursing student at the time of our interview, was raised by a single woman – her step-mother, who married Devi's father when her mother died shortly after she was born. When her father also died several years later, her step-mother was left with single-handedly raising Devi, as well as three children of her own. When Devi first mentioned this to me, I immediately feared the worst, bracing myself for a potential tale of suffering and mistreatment by an impoverished step-mother who also had to feed her own. Instead, she shared a story about a heroic single and landless woman who, through sheer force of will, successfully managed to raise and educate 4 children on the poverty wages of an Indian daily laborer. There were struggles, of course, as well as unexpected windfalls. Two of Devi's brothers dropped out in high school, one of them now struggles with addiction, while Devi herself was only able to attend her nursing college thanks to a scholarship program for disadvantaged PVTG girls. Yet her step-mother, Devi explained, did not even ask her children to do chores around the house – so determined was she that their experiences were as close to those of middle-class children as possible, with ample time for

study and play.

The Steep Price of Schooling

Although tuition and lodging at Tribal Welfare schools was free, some expenses remained unavoidable: exam fees, bus fares, annual purchases of books and shoes. These seemingly trivial expenditures could easily amount to a small fortune for subsistence tribal farmers who, in the words of one respondent, "had no need for money until then, because our only regular purchase was salt." Raising even a few hundred extra rupees each month for a child's education could mean weeks of back-breaking labor – known as *coolie* work – for local elites like village heads and government employees, whose landholdings were large enough to hire field hands.

As in many parts of rural India, *coolie* work was the only wage source readily available to non-literate workers in Araku Valley without migrating elsewhere, at least prior to implementation of the National Rural Employee Guarantee Act (NREGA) in the late 2000s. But until NREGA set a price floor in the agrarian economy by guaranteeing 100 days of work to each rural household at 100 rupees per day, standard wages for *coolie* work in the Visakhapatnam Agency were as low as low as 12 rupees ($0.15) per day:

> *Purni*: Back then there were a few local leaders – we call them *nayaks* right, they're a little like kings, people who had some more wealth. My parents would go for *coolie* work at the *nayak*'s house. Each village had its own system and they'd pay you based on that. Some only gave a kilo of rice. If I recall correctly, on certain jobs you could make up to 12 rupees [15 cents], if you worked the whole day. *12 rupees for a full day. Even that chance was so rare that no one passed it up, including me*. I would work like a mule all day and then take those 12 rupees with me to school, where I spent it on my education.

Purni, age 28, is from an interior village without access to a road; by the time she was in school, 12 rupees a day was already well below the official Indian poverty line. Almost every respondent either from an interior village or above the age of 30 had similar tales about extreme hardships introduced by the growing need for money. In their telling, the uncertain prospects of

even earning below-poverty wages meant that virtually *any* wage work was impossible to pass up, no matter how poorly paid. It could not be avoided because the money was needed for education.

This burden, therefore, largely fell on respondents' parents – the Adivasi subsistence farmers supporting their educations, who were often already strained by the effects of their children's absence on their own farms. These respondents described how their parents thus had to make brutal choices over abandoning their own fields for the landlord's measly wages, or going hungry so that their children may eat instead. Obviously such conditions made for a very difficult life, and memories of poverty and parental sacrifice served a powerful narrative role in respondents' accounts of their childhood and education.

In this way, tales of parents' hard work, suffering, and the warnings issued to their kids served to integrate larger goals and meanings of 'real development' into their own self-narratives. More than just a way of illustrating life in the Agency "back then," more even than a symbolic opposition helping to structure their own sense of progress in the world, such stories helped respondents orient themselves in a new, more "developed" world. Consider this exchange with Asha, a tribal woman (age 38) raised in an interior village near the border of Odisha, and now working as a warden for a girls' hostel in Araku Valley:

Asha: My parents made sure we never went hungry. Because they would work day and night to feed us, even if that meant they went to bed drinking nothing but rice broth, or eating a few leaves and shoots. It makes me want to cry just thinking about it. From those depths, those struggles, we somehow came up to a better situation today.

Vivek: What would they say about your education?

Asha: Just one thing. My mother's desire was that we didn't end up like her, because they didn't get to attend school themselves right? "So the two of you need to get educated no matter what," she would tell my brother and me.

Vivek: So they said you needed to work hard and come up in life, is that right?

Asha: They said, "Look at how much we struggle." Remember when I told you about that one time I climbed the hostel wall and ran back home because I didn't like being in school? Well, when I reached home my mother told me, "I used to be that way too. Look how I turned out. At least learn from our mistakes."

For my parents to be working so hard just to put us in school – you need to realize what that meant. They'd say, "Our parents were not educated. We were not educated. Now what will happen if you don't study either?" My mother wanted to be a teacher and those were the things she finally taught.

We can now begin to see an underlying cultural model at work. For tribal youth in contemporary Araku Valley, formal education is a form of empowerment, the platonic ideal of "real development." As was made clear through stories about the previous generation, studying hard is what makes the difference between the struggles of poverty and the dignities of a better life. Crucially, this is not a case of the old representing the bad alone; rather, it suggests an intimate and collaborative process across generations. My relatively young respondents credited their parents with providing them the means for transforming themselves. Those means could be symbolic, structural, and cultural as well.

Prem (age 23), the most scholastically-minded of 6 children, was an exceptionally good student whose family invested heavily in his education. During his school days, his academic performance had led to scholarships at elite institutes in the city. Years later, Prem credits his father for giving him the mental fortitude to persevere:

Vivek: You left your house in 8th grade to start living in a [Tribal Welfare Department] hostel. How did that make you feel at the time?

Prem: Hostel life wasn't easy but I felt that life at home would be even harder. But at home they said, "He's studying well, why bring him home only to face the same old problems?" So they encouraged me to stay. And I did.

Prem: But I could change things by studying hard. So with that in mind, my father told me to rank 1st in my 10th board exams no matter what, because each year the *topper* gets a scholarship and a place in a good intermediate college in Vizag[20]. So that was my goal: to somehow leave

[20] Secondary schooling in India follows a 10+2 system in which grades 6-10 are completed at a high school and grades 11-12 are studied at separate "junior colleges." How students perform on their standardized 10th board exams (if they pass) determines which junior colleges they may attend and what academic tracks they can pursue. The highest ranking students have their pick of the most prestigious

> the Agency and study in Vizag. *My father's words gave me the grit to actually get 1st rank – not just in my high school but in the whole of Araku Valley*.

Well aware of the shortcomings of what school opportunities they had in the Agency, ambitious tribal youth like Prem and Asha nevertheless understood long-term education – whatever its shortcomings relative to that of their privileged, urban peers – as their only way out of the endemic poverty and suffering of a stigmatized people. They understood better than anyone the immense historic significance of being the first Adivasi generation *ever* to finish secondary school and pursue higher education as a *matter of fact* in their communities of sustenance farmers, where widespread illiteracy was once synonymous with underdevelopment and social exclusion. After all, like Esu's formative memory of his mother's arrest, the generational trauma of "being uneducated" (*chaduvu lekunda*) in the Agency laid bare the intimate ties between economic exploitation and political powerlessness.

Education as Developing Social Knowledge

In settings of high modernity, self-identity, "like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made. Yet this task has to be accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities" (Giddens 1991, p. 3). For the first generation students of Araku Valley, schools provided a place ripe with possibilities and sources of guidance for the future. To overcome the challenges of administrating education in the Valley's difficult, zone-of-refuge (Scott 2009) terrain, the Integrated Tribal Development Agency and the AP Tribal Welfare Department – run by the central and state governments, respectively – built free boarding schools

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colleges and the most desirable course concentrations, which provide the prerequisites for highly selective university degrees like engineering and medicine; the lowest rankers must choose from what schools and courses are left after everyone else has made their choice. A similar process occurs at the end of 12th, when students take competitive examinations that determine their acceptance into universities and other institutes for tertiary education.

throughout Fifth Schedule areas like the Visakhapatnam Agency, which provided free room, board and education to adivasi children between grades 5-10.

Because the Right to Education Act had now mandated school attendance for all Indian children until age 15, these schools needed to be large enough to house hundreds of Adivasi teenagers at a time, who came from interior villages as far as 40 kilometers away, and would remain there throughout the school year. In a region of India where *pucca*, or permanent, buildings were still rare, they needed to be durable concrete structures that could not only accommodate a large volume of activities like teaching and lodging happening all at once, but would reliably continue to do so for many years to come. The schools also had to be accessible by an all-weather road; by the mid-2010s, tarmac roads had begun to increasingly crisscross the Valley but nonetheless remained exception to the dirt paths along which most travel occurred. And they needed to be near revenue headquarters, somewhere close enough to administer.

Such conditions resulted in the construction of Tribal Welfare residential schools that were by far the largest buildings in the towns and villages where they were built. They were concrete behemoths rising like fortresses from the pastoral landscape. The schools had walled campuses several acres in size, and included separate buildings for classrooms, boys' and girls' hostels, mess halls, staff quarters and recreation. It was in such places that my respondents spent substantial portions of their youths, coming of age under the eye of their teachers and hostel wardens. Relative to the self-contained isolation of village life, schools were buzzing metropolitan centers that brought respondents into mediated contact with the world outside the Valley, without actually leaving it. They learned a version of the standardized national curriculum, and for the first time ever shared a syllabus with age-cohort peers nationwide. Perhaps even more than that, this was an activity done together with their classmates, fellow

Araku youth from all local tribal communities. Consider the following account by Ravi (28, male), a Master's degree holder aspiring for a government job at the ITDA:

Ravi: Facilities [at the Tribal Welfare hostel] were limited, but they were alright. It was better than the village. You have three meals a day, a room to sleep in, other kids to accompany you. Not so bad.

Vivek: Were all the other students tribal too?

Ravi: Yes, from a similar situation as myself.

Vivek: Can you tell me about your friends during your hostel years?

Ravi: Not many people from my community, mostly from other communities. Among my friends it was mostly people from *Kotiya*, *Porja*[21], others. I had a lot of good friends from those communities. There was a boy named Das. He was my competition in education. Yeah, it wasn't bad.

At their hostel schools, Araku Valley youth formed lifelong friendships, fell in love, and forged critical new alliances in order to navigate a strange new world. In his incisive study of "timepass" in Indian universities, the anthropologist Craig Jeffrey finds that Indian educational institutes at the turn of the 21st century were places where first-generation students from traditional, often agrarian backgrounds could cultivate new alliances and tantalizing new possibilities together. This was a paradoxical finding given that these same institutes were also notorious as places where frustrated youth were stuck in liminal waithood for years on end. Yet it was precisely in sharing this misery with each other that first-generation students from traditional, often agrarian backgrounds found "a means through which young men could build youthful solidarities, sometimes across caste and class boundaries" (Jeffrey 2010).

Similarly, Tribal Welfare schools provided Adivasi youth a means to forge new solidarities across the boundaries of tribe, which previously would have delineated membership in a given village community and its corresponding social world. Ravi, for example, formed lifelong

[21] Kotiyas and Porjas are two among the 33 scheduled tribal communities officially enumerated in the state of Andhra Pradesh (Radhika 2016).

friendships at school with many young people outside of his own *Valmiki* tribe; he mentions Das not only as a friend but as "my competition in education." Such friendships were acts of solidarity in collective Adivasi efforts to bring "real development" to the Valley. The study groups that tribal youth formed at school would last for long afterwards too, often evolving into Whatsapp networks where information about job opportunities, upcoming placement exams, or legal strategies could be shared. As we will see in subsequent chapters, such groups and networks would become crucial pipelines of mutual support and information when the heady promises of education and development metastasized into something more hostile and predatory.

Schools also offered students cultural role models and important sources of guidance in their teachers and school officials, who were all members of scheduled tribes themselves thanks to affirmative action policies for socially disadvantaged castes. Their teachers were some of the few Adivasis my respondents knew with permanent government employment and a stable foothold in the Indian middle class. In these older "jobholders," who were well-paid and respected yet hailed from remote Agency areas themselves, my respondents could see their own possible future pathways to middle-class stability. Consider this discussion by Esu, whom we met in the previous section, on finding guidance from such adults at the Tribal Welfare School:

Vivek: So, you moved to a hostel for your studies in 7th grade. Who guided you?

Esu: Guidance…there are some people who I saw and learned from. Here in the Agency there aren't many to tell you to do this or do that. In those days that kind of guidance was especially rare. The thing for us was that if you went to hostel, your teachers would guide you. Who said, if we proceed like this, your futures will be better off. Also, naturally there were some people whom I saw and was inspired by. I thought, "if we want to become like them then we must do these things compulsorily."

Vivek: As in, what kinds of people?

Esu: As in some people who were in good positions. Around here, there were a lot of our people working in the Revenue Department back then. Teachers and education department officials were rare but a lot of us were in Revenue. So their lifestyle used to be different. Every little thing wasn't a struggle for them.

By carefully observing his teachers, as well as the Revenue Department officials from his

own tribe, Esu had someone he could emulate and consult for advice. If the cost of their education were the immense hardships suffered by their peasant farmer parents, here was the path forward that would make it worthwhile. This phenomenon is certainly not unique to Araku Valley: many writers have noted how, all over India, government jobs are seen as *the* means to escape intergenerational poverty because of guaranteed anti-discriminatory quotas for women, disadvantaged castes, and minority communities – as well as clear formal entry requirements involving accessible education credentials and exams administered in regional languages (French 2011; Choksi 2024).

Thanks to the stark material gains involved in this form of upward mobility – a government teacher earns upwards of 95,000 rupees ($1100) per month, whereas a typical farming household in Araku is lucky to net 15,000 rupees ($175) through all income activities combined – scholars have tended to understand this phenomenon in political economy terms, i.e. the creation of a lower-middle class bourgeoisie and client relations with the state (see Gupta 1998 for example). But my respondent interviews reveal a cultural element at play as well. Most job-aspirant Valley youth hoped to become government teachers or nurses – and not just because these were the best futures available to them within their cultural toolkits. Such professionals were also seen as social role models who had a positive effect on Agency communities that was worth emulating:

> *Prasad:* Because of teachers, a lot of people are coming up and improving their situation. So, if I could teach and inspire a few young tribals, wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't that be the best reputation a man could ask for? Now, any teacher doesn't teach in order to corrupt the students, right? They wish for their students too to improve themselves, study well, and so on.

Prasad (male, age 33) is a *Valmiki* farmer with M.A. and B.Ed. degrees. He and his wife currently live in their native village, tending to his father's fields while they attempt the years-long selection process for government teachers. In the meanwhile, Prasad works as a "village volunteer" for a major political party in Andhra Pradesh, a role which he describes as motivated

more by "community good" than by the meager stipend it pays – akin to his self-described motives for becoming a teacher. Teachers "wish for their students to improve themselves, study well" and can "inspire a few young tribals." The work they do – that they are generously paid to do – results in "the best reputation a man could ask for." In replying this way, Prasad articulates a community-centric meaning of "real development" as a vision of different Adivasi generations helping one another attain success in the modernizing, developing world of Araku Valley.

Developing into an Educated Person

Giddens argues that modernity requires "autobiographical thinking," "for developing a coherent sense of one's life history is a prime means of escaping the thrall of the past and opening oneself out to the future" (p. 72). Respondents also spoke explicitly about the ties between development and education: namely, how education puts into effect positive changes in Adivasi life through the cultivation and development of beneficial self-characteristics. Young Valley women were particularly eloquent and forthcoming of their views on how education personally empowered them. Consider the following from Laxmi, 22, a college graduate from the Agency headquarters of Paderu:

> *Laxmi*: Development means, first thing, education. By education I don't just mean 10th, inter, degree certificates. I mean, what is your life? They should be fully educated on what life entails, on the nature of society and the outside world, on how to be with different types of people, and speak bravely to them. They need to have that kind of talent. *Only with that kind of education can we have real development*. The educated person should be able to discuss the issues they face with strangers as well as they do with their own families. Let's say there is some need your family has, you have to go to town to speak with the municipal president, secretary, whomever. It could be that you need a ration card, so you have to go get one. But, if you want a ration card, what documents and other things will you need to bring? Who do you take them to, and what do you tell them? There are a lot of people who don't even know these things. It could be with a village leader, our family relations, our neighbors…if we are able to develop the talent to speak freely and frequently, then I feel we will also have more development.

Laxmi was the first to attend school in her family and now worked on the IT desk of a local

political party office. Bright and politically conscious, she described herself as an example of someone who is able to speak thanks in large part to her education. In her telling, "development means, first thing, education" because schooling was a medium for novel connections with the outside world. For her, the education necessary for 'real development' entailed being "fully educated on what life entails, on the nature of society and the outside world, on how to be with different types of people." Being educated taught you how to speak; it meant you could go places you couldn't go before. And, of course, it opened doors to more renumerative work for *adivasi* men and women alike.

Adivasi girls and young women were academically more ambitious and competitive than their male counterparts, routinely outperforming boys for top ranks in exams, as well as applying and successfully securing more government jobs than men. Educated tribal women were also enterprising in other ways, using their learning to start new businesses or tutor their own children. "I finished school. I studied well. I can go live in the city on my own now if I want to," one respondent charmingly said. The interactions of education and gender were so important, argued Usha (female, age 24), a 12th standard graduate, that their effects outweighed even those of being tribal:

Vivek: Do you feel like you've faced specific difficulties in your life because you are a tribal woman coming from an Agency Area?

Usha: There are some people who treat you differently because you're tribal. I don't really think about that. Because people are the same, just their area changes. But as a woman…*well, women just face a much harder life than men. Every girl wishes she was born as a boy, so she could enjoy the freedoms that boys do.*

Here in tribal areas, lots of women end up without studies. If you have an education, you can find even a small job. All the women who are at least my mom's age are only housewives because they don't have any education. So they can't even leave the house. *They just don't know the outside world. If you have education, you can go somewhere.*

Usha was just 17 when she dropped out of a nursing degree in order to marry, against her family's wishes, a young man from a neighboring house down the road. The marriage, she says,

was a disappointment: her husband did not work and was prone to violent outbursts. Usha often regretted abandoning her studies for him instead of heeding her family's advice. Still, she considered herself an educated woman because she was not only literate but was internet-savvy and "knew the outside world," unlike her mother who never attended school and now "can't even leave the house." Here we witness a "dialogue with time" (Giddens 1991 p. 72) as Usha invokes education as an ameliorating factor in the "much harder life" faced by women. The distinction between men and women, and then educated and uneducated women is the main emphasis. Her comparisons with women of her mother's age, then, work as a sort of "intergenerational self" discourse that, given their collective disadvantage, charts what it means to "go somewhere."

Moreover, Usha's own life story was an example of such "reflexive self-endeavors" in action: after her son was born, and facing dashed formal job prospects of her own, Usha ingeniously stumbled upon a way to earn a living that would not have been possible without an education. Most people in Araku Valley purchased their clothes either from stalls at the Wednesday weekly market, or from one of a few small clothing shops in Araku Valley town. During the Covid-19 pandemic, however, as part of the rapid spread of e-commerce in India (Poonam and Saini 2024), online retailers had begun delivering parcels directly to households off the main roads in the Visakhapatnam Agency, addresses once considered too remote to service. The first to take advantage of this new facility were educated and Internet-literate young Adivasis like Usha.

While shopping for clothes on her phone during the Covid-19 lockdown, Usha discovered that by ordering clothes in bulk online and reselling them at the traditional weekly market by her house, she could make a small margin on the price differences. Moreover, directly ordering via e-commerce allowed her to bypass the usual middlemen on whom most Valley merchants

depended. “I could sell clothes of better quality and better variety for a lower price” than her competitors, she explained. Soon, with the help of small loans cobbled together from several relatives, Usha managed to open a small clothing shop on the main road, next to the site of the weekly market, that was stocked with the latest fashions purchased online and delivered from Hyderabad. She employed her own husband as the shop attendant.

It is important to caution that Usha’s tale should not be read as a “developmental success story” represented enterprise in India’s new economy. Usha herself does not treat it as such. The need to open a shop only arose in the first place from the interminable difficulties of an abusive marriage and thwarted access to formal job markets for credentialed workers. “A lot of my classmates, they became jobholders,” she told me. “Had I stayed in school and not married Sai [her husband], I could have been like them.” The business itself was precarious and provided Usha barely enough income to support her family, while saddling her with ever new debts to repay. Her clever way of arbitraging between digital and traditional markets, moreover, turned out to be a more temporary advantage than she expected: many of Usha’s young female customers eventually discovered that nothing was stopping them from shopping for clothes online themselves.

Rather, the significance of this tale lies in the way Usha recounted it in our interview as an example of “engaging the outside world.” Opening her business required, first of all, Usha to be an early adopter of digital commerce in the Agency, and secondly convincing the family members she borrowed that she had a viable business idea and a reasonable plan to pay them back. “I had to convince them that, even though I’m a girl, this was a good idea and that I could do it,” she says. She also worked with her father to successfully obtain a bank loan on her behalf. Despite dropping out of nursing school, Usha still credited her education for providing her the

skills, savvy and confidence necessary to pull this off. This stood in marked contrast to, say, her mother – who herself sold bangles at the weekly market, but in the traditional manner that still marked her as a housewife earning a simple supplementary income. Being educated not only allowed Usha to construe her own efforts to make ends meet while raising a child as the categorically different struggles of a modern young business owner. It also endowed her with a "toolkit of actions" (Swidler 1986) that enabled her to relatively be both far more engaged with "the outside world" and bring far more outside forces into her influence. In this way, Usha shares with Laxmi a view of education as "real development."

The distinctions between past and present and between educated and not also provided opportunities for new ways of understanding oneself and one's role in society. Some respondents distinguished educated people (like themselves) by their supposed propensity for diagnosing social issues and engaging with community problems. Consider the following by Subha (F, 27):

Vivek: Besides a potential job, what else do you get out of your studies?

Subha: There is a difference between educated people and uneducated people. Suppose if you want to talk to someone, you have to think before you talk, right? Educated people think before they talk. They don't talk unnecessarily. But uneducated people talk as much as they want. Even if they don't want to talk, they will still talk.

In the same way, if you want to talk about the problems happening in the society, educated people will be able to grasp what's going on. They can gauge why an issue is important. If something is going wrong, we will feel bad and think hard about it.

But if you don't have an education, you'll think something like, "why must I suffer for this? What does it have to do with me? I just do my work and don't bother anyone." People here just think that way unless they've gone to school.

Vivek: I see. So that is the difference?

Subha: Yes, that is the difference. I will give you one more example. Before we started you gave me the [informed consent] form to sign. I looked it over and could see that your intentions are good. But a person who isn't educated cannot read the form, so they become suspicious instead. They'll start asking around, "Who is he? Why has he come here? What is he really after?" Like that.

Here we see what looks a lot like – what is – classic social boundary making. By delineating the differences between "educated" and "uneducated" people, Subha, a 27-year-old farmer and

part-time educator, describes the benefits of her education through a symbolic opposition elevating the moral virtues of educated people -- and by extension, herself. The irony is that Subha more or less faces the same material conditions as the "uneducated" neighbors she disparages. Subha has two degrees but is unemployed; she and her husband are sustenance farmers just like those without education in her village, tending to their family's small plot of land while making attempt after attempt for government employment. But halfway through Subha's discussion we see the tie to modernity in which Subha links education to the need to take charge and play an active role in the problems of society. Whether it's true or not, by crediting education for awakening tribal people up to political consciousness, Subha is framing herself by extension as someone with the ability to change her circumstances.

Analysis: Education as a Narrative Structure, Real Development

Cultural sociologists warn us not to put too much stock into accounts as real empirical claims about the world, that talk is cheap (Jerolmack and Khan 2014) – although it is worth saying that the accounts of Esu and Devi, for example, are par for the course when it comes to the immense range of exploitation and injustices that India's scheduled tribes face to this day (Balagopal 1988, Sundar 2016, Xaxa et al. 2014). But even if we do not take these stories at face value, we are still left with self-narratives of education that are intimately identified with parents who warn, "Without schooling, you will end up like me." Modernity, Giddens tells us, is a "segmented" experience characterized by all sorts of self-conscious rifts with the past (Giddens 1991, p. 84). "A person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor…in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography… must continually integrate events that occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self" (*ibid*., p. 54). This, in turn, helps people regain a sense of order as they

"deal with the troubles created by departures from legitimacy" (Callero 2003, p. 124).

Thus, what we see here in both Esu's and Devi's case is the construction of new forms of modern identities where none previously existed before, and which tradition could not automatically provide. They did so not just as Adivasi students but as *future developmental citizens* participating in the socio-economic life of modern, democratic India. Yet this isn't to say that tradition has lost its remit in the social processes at play – the shadow of the past was embodied by my respondents' parents, and kept very much alive in the recollected tales of their sacrifice. In this way, the struggles of one Adivasi generation are reconstituted in the self-narratives of the next one, giving meaning and moral direction in their combined struggle to depart a life as sustenance tribal farmers in the Araku highlands, and through education, become a new type of tribal person.

Examining the cultural accounts of a new generation of educated young women in Malawi, Frye (2012) argues that "aspirations should be interpreted not as rational calculations, but instead as assertions of a virtuous identity." Persistent optimism about "bright futures" in the face of high dropout rates and chronic youth unemployment, in other words, did not reflect 'irrational' expectations about the future. Rather, it reflected participation in a transformative and virtuous cultural endeavor *in the present day*.

This, I argue, is the way to understand how Agency youth discuss their educations: as multi-generational reflexive endeavors whose meanings are fraught with the imperative to develop. Here, education embodies the pursuit of "real development" as an institutionalized, future-oriented endeavor with transformative consequences experienced in the present day. As the first generation of students ever in their families, going to school every day was significant in ways that went beyond status attainment, state mandates or even changing norms around what children

and young adults do all day (Martin 2000). The expansion of formal education in Araku Valley was not gradual; the trickle of relatively elite *adivasi* children who continued into high school suddenly became, after 2005, the direction in which the whole river flowed; entire generations of tribal teenagers began departing their villages until they were at least 15, and often much longer than that.

This entailed dramatic changes to longstanding divisions of labor in the subsistence economy of the Valley, which remains organized around village communities where most people live off of the land. Away most of the year in Tribal Welfare boarding schools, able-bodied older children could no longer help their households plow fields, raise livestock, carry goods to the market, gather daily supplies of fresh water and firewood, or with any other of the many highly labor-intensive tasks required for survival in tribal villages. The household activities once performed by adolescent *adivasi* children now fell upon an older generation of Adivasi parents, who often already worked to the point of exhaustion each day.

India's "Merit" Cultural Model of Education

To be sure, Araku respondents all had a clear future goal: a government job. In doing so, they were following a cultural model established by upper caste Indians in previous decades. Called the "merit model," this view asserted that through success in education, it was possible to pull one up from the poverty of India and into respectable middle class success (Subramaniam 2019, Irani 2019). The merit model was epitomized by the small but highly visible and influential class of Indians whom education had propelled from humble rural origins to middle-class government jobs to international success in just two or three generations. This model was sold to the general Indian population as their pathway to success and stability, but was only made possible through

education and network connections provided by caste privilege (Balagopal 2000; Deshpande 2006; Ajit et al. 2012; Subramaniam 2019).

My own family is a case in point. I come from a family of rural Andhra teachers, precisely the humble middle-class jobs so highly prized by respondents in Araku. We were not wealthy but we still enjoyed enormous caste privileges as Brahmins, which meant for instance that both men and women in the family were college educated and held permanent public employment as far back as the 1960s. Both of my paternal grandparents taught in government schools in the Srikakulam district. My mother's father worked as a civil engineer for the Andhra Pradesh government; my maternal grandmother did not work, but my mother grew up with at least aunts who worked in public education or public administration. Members of my parents' generation, meanwhile, graduated further to public sector employment as engineers and scientists.

Until the 1990s, it was assumed in my family that virtually anyone could find a government job so long as they finished schooling – caste networks in hiring mattered of course, but their real advantage was their systematic access to quality, publicly-funded education at a time when most Indians could not even attend primary school. Brahmins did not even make up 5% of the population of Andhra Pradesh, but they monopolized the faculty and administration of the state's premier institutions of higher education – ensuring that Brahmin students under their care received the best possible education and strong mentorship. Once those credentials were in place, then, a government job was all but guaranteed.

Teacher families also knew how and in *what* ways to educate their children. So my parents' generation joined India's budding class of scientists and engineers in the 1980s, who would be sought after around the world for their expertise. Their version of Indian development, then, was a fundamentally functional world in which they could pride themselves on their honesty, merit

and good citizenship – values that were amply echoed by the Protestant Ethic of Clinton-era America, which quickly embraced them as its “model minorities.” Like other scientific and engineering elites, many Brahmins genuinely believed the world justly rewarded hard work, dedication, and especially the cultivation of technical expertise – and proudly regarded the professional success of their fellow caste members an undeniable proof of its favor.

This narrative, wherein professional success appears as the seemingly natural outcome of individual dedication and cultivated expertise, constitutes a potent ideological construction serving a crucial hegemonic purpose in the Gramscian sense. It functions effectively to universalise a specific, privileged trajectory while simultaneously obfuscating the systemic role of caste capital—in the form of inherited educational access and embedded networks—in structuring possibilities and, crucially, foreclosing them for others, thereby naturalizing inequality by masking its structural, caste-based origins.

Furthermore, this chronicle of upward mobility, rooted firmly in unacknowledged caste privilege, aligns seamlessly not only with the dominant Indian "merit" discourse but also converges neatly with Western developmental paradigms that valorize individual educational attainment as the primary engine of progress, often eliding deeper social stratifications. It is precisely this convenient, self-congratulatory, and ultimately exclusionary narrative, articulated from a position of inherited advantage and functioning as the dominant "common sense," that demands rigorous critical interrogation.

Education for Employment

What was possible for my family could not be emulated by the youth in Araku. Sold by the so-called merit model and believing that hard work and educational success would launch them towards the stable, good paying jobs their parents could not attain, they quickly found that their

dedication to education alone was insufficient for accessing the opportunities enjoyed by previous generations of upper caste and middle class Indians. Turns out, not only did they face the same exclusion and barriers their parents did, but opportunities were harder to find and rarer than they had been for previous generations of Indian graduates.

But what was certain was that unless they tried, they would have no chance of escaping the impoverishment of their parents. Esu is a case in point. He had a steadfast goal of pursuing government jobs, but quickly found this was easier said than done given the limited opportunities he was able to access:

Vivek: Do you remember what you wanted to be when you grew up? Did you ever dream about that as a child?

Esu: I did. I wanted to become an employee, a job holder. Since my childhood I wanted to become a government employee. Because our situation was not good, right? So I had to do something. Not just anything but…becoming an employee was the way out. So that was my dream. It still is.

Vivek: So were there other government employees in your village you could see? People you could see yourself one day becoming?

Esu: There were, some people in my own village were government employees. So I'd see them and think it would be good to become like them. Meaning, when you're an employee your life style changes a little bit. Any necessities you have for the house – little things like clothes, diapers – are in your reach without too much difficulty. Because you have a revenue coming in, right? An income.

Vivek: I see…and that would give you stability.

Esu: *It gives you stability and also creates respect for you in society. That's why ever since I was a boy, my thinking was to land a government job one day, no matter what it takes.*

The more important finding, however, pertains to how respondents explained this enthusiasm and what alternatives compared unfavorably to government jobs. The main reason was actually stability – a government job was a permanent, formal role that brought economic stability in addition to caste status. Being an employee was a respectable thing.

It is precisely at this juncture where predatory development comes into play. Time and time again, even the highest-achieving Araku youth discovered that their talents and abilities were not perceived as good enough for the outside world. Take the example of Prem. Thanks to his top

rank results, Prem was given admission to Narayana Junior College, a prestigious intermediate institute in Visakhapatnam that was famed for getting its students placed into India's top engineering and medical colleges. The ITDA Project Officer, the highest ranking civil servant in the Agency, offered Prem a full scholarship so he could attend. It was a major opportunity that only went to two tribal students from the district each year. And yet, Prem discovered that for all of his academic prowess, he was never able to escape discrimination from his fellow classmates, who judged him fundamentally incapable of meeting their own academic standards.

Prem: The [ITDA Project Officer] called me and said, "I will get you a seat at Narayana Junior College in Vizag, son. Will you go?" We didn't know anything about Vizag at that time. I was worried whether or not I would be able to keep up. But I visited the college and was very impressed by the facilities and quality of teaching they had there. Plus the ITDA was offering me a full scholarship that covered tuition fees, food, lodging…

So I went to Vizag for my intermediate studies, even though some people initially said neglectful things like, "You are from the mountains, what will you study here?" I went anyway.

Vivek: Really? Who said that?

Prem: My friends, classmates from the city. They all asked me what was the point of me attending Narayana, being someone from the mountain areas. A lot of them would haze me like that. "Mountain boy, mountain boy" was what they said to bully me. I tried not to pay any attention but it hurt my feelings at first until I spoke to my parents about it. I told them, "The other students won't stop calling me 'mountain boy' and I want to come back home."

My father told me, "Don't pay any attention to them. What is yours is yours. Theirs is theirs. Let barking dogs bark." So then I felt much calmer, and started to study hard again. If you want to get a good name [at Narayana College], you had to be a good student. If you wanted to become a good student, you had to put in the work. So I began studying day and night my first year. And when the results came out, I got 1st rank even down there.

Vivek: You got 1st rank again! So you outperformed all the students calling you mountain boy?

Prem: Yes…all those people finally shut their mouths. They started appreciating me instead, which made me very happy. So I thought about what my parents told me, which I remember to this day.

Even the principal praised me in front of all the students. He said, "Prem is not even from our area. He was born and raised in the mountains and yet he is studying so well. Appreciate that. Respect him. You all grew up in cities and went to English Medium schools. This boy attended Telugu Medium schools his whole life and still outperformed you."

So they all hung their heads in shame. After that, nobody said a word against me. They would only talk to me with respect. I forgave them too.

In the following chapter we will further examine the implications of systemic caste-based

discrimination in Indian education by analyzing high-level policy discourse around skilling.

Chapter 4
Transforming Education from "Development We Want" into Predatory Development

> "The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level. The entire function of the State has been transformed; the State has become an 'educator.'"
>
> – Antonin Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (1929)

When "Real Development" Turns Predatory

The discriminatory attitudes of Prem's classmates extended beyond routine schoolboy bullying – as a new generation of optimistic, aspirational lower caste youth came up through education, they quickly encountered a new barrier: concerns around "low skill penetration" and unemployability. This chapter examines how the continued exclusion of oppressed caste Indians from the rapidly growing productive sectors of the economy, despite the success of educational inclusion, comes to be seen as a problem of *managing a demographic burden* in elite social policy forums, effectively covering up the responsibility of larger social forces at work. In short, it explores how hand-wringing over low skill penetration in an era of universal education is part of the story of predatory development. I show how **predatory development** occurs when demands by educated lower caste youth for formal sector jobs get officially rearticulated as social unrest by poorly educated youth left unskilled and unemployable.

A common way this occurs is through the explicit reframing of the country's roughly 600 million people under 30 as a "demographic dividend" at risk of becoming a "demographic burden" instead. Consider the following statements by the director of the Impact and Policy Research Institute (IMPRI) in New Delhi, at a 2020 online panel discussion on the socio-economic effects of Covid-2019 (excerpted from my field notes):

> The mood was grim when a group of Indian statisticians, demographers and policy makers convened in July 2020 for a Zoom discussion of Covid-19's effects on India's so-called "demographic dividend" (IMPRI 2020). Balwant Singh Mehta, IMPRI Research Director in New Delhi, laid out the depressing facts: Despite the national obsession with schooling, only about half of the country's 600 million youth were making it through secondary school. Few possessed any form of vocational skills. Among those who worked, over 90% were employed in informal roles that offered few protections. Many more had been shut out of labor markets altogether. Even before the pandemic, labor force participation dropped to just 32% among the working-age population, while overall unemployment surpassed 17%. Paradoxically, unemployment increased with education, peaking at 35% among young people with a post-graduate degree. And the number of working-age Indians who were neither in education, employment, or training (NEET) had shot up from 70 million in 2004-5 to 115 million by 2017.
>
> "If this kind of youth is not appropriately trained or absorbed in the productive work," stated Mehta, "they will be, you know…they will engage in some kind of anti-social activities and that will be a disaster…*The demographic dividend is now a demographic burden*."

Here, dismal empirical facts elaborating the failure of the Indian economy to productively absorb its large youth population serve as the basis for re-categorizing hundreds of millions of young people as a "demographic burden" on the nation. The causal story offered is Mehta's prediction that the marginalized youth shut out of the economy "will engage in some kind of anti-social activities and that will be a disaster." At the same time, what is curious about Mehta's claim is that the specific facts he cites do not tell a story about the motivations, interests or plans of unemployed youth like Prem or Esu.

We might think of conditions like joblessness and underemployment as the end results of a broken school-to-work pipeline. Here they are invoked instead as possible *causes* of future unrest in order to make a point about the social dangers of India's "demographic burden." Indeed, the conflation of disappointing empirical facts about a growing "youth problem" is a near-universal feature of the taken-for-grantedness of the failures of educational expansion in India. These claims justify extremely unequal divisions in the modern Indian economy, and attempt to redirect

aspirational marginalized youth into a permanent underclass of a "skilled" but informal workforce.

Using the case of the national "skill development" project aimed primarily at first generation students from non-metro areas, I attempt to show that elite claims of their "unemployability" and "education failure" amount to *perverse justifications* neither internally coherent not consistent with previously-held standards. Instead they reveal the hidden logics of *Varna* at work, perpetually reconstituting lower castes as inferior, unfit, and undeserving of sharing in the bounty of a modern Indian economy dominated by upper castes (Ambedkar 1936). Thus, they are expressions of predatory development by narratively re-characterizing education, the very mechanism meant to enable social mobility of long-excluded marginalized groups, as an institution that ensures their marginalization by default.

Predatory Development: A Conceptual Definition

The central thesis of this dissertation is that **predatory development** represents a qualitatively distinct new mode of engineering "inclusive" social and economic development in India – and whose mechanisms, overlooked in prevailing debates around development, can help explain some of the confounding features of India's recent progress. Chapters 1 and 2 identified two conflicting definitions of developmental goals as construed by policymakers and by the targets of their programs on the ground. Indian policymakers at the state and central level implicitly understood development as a form of economic modernization whose primary purpose is to "close the gap" between India and more advanced nations – a perspective that closely hews to most academic writings on development as well, barring the most heterodox perspectives (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Sachs 2005). This growth-driven notion of Indian development

takes the form of capital-heavy projects such as national highways, energy infrastructure and mines, as well as greater commercialization in sectors like tourism and agriculture – and its effects can be conveniently measured in GDP and foreign investment statistics.

Less conveniently, it is precisely such projects that have raised enormous opposition via grassroots-level social movements and long-running armed insurgencies simmering across central India's resource-rich tribal belt. Echoing Xaxa (2016), I have shown how such resistance should not be interpreted as a form of "anti-development" or anti-state politics but rather a resistance to externally imposed restrictions on local autonomy and political rights. Indeed, tribal people in Araku consistently strove to differentiate "real" development from marquee development projects in tribal areas like tourism and mining, which they saw as appropriating adivasi lands and cultures with little benefit to tribal communities themselves. Chapter 2 and 3 analyze the expansion of formal education to Agency areas as a prime example of the former. This chapter examines why, having achieved its aims, the successful project of universal education was re-construed as a causal factor perpetuating underdevelopment instead.

Background: India's Jobless Growth

Demographic Dividend to Demographic Burden

For over two decades, India has consistently remained one of the fastest growing economies in the world, averaging 6.7% in annual GDP growth. During that time, 270 million people were lifted out of poverty, maternal mortality rates plummeted, polio was eradicated and, of course, education levels exploded across the country. Education levels, as seen in previous chapters, also shot upwards. By 2021, 97.4% of school-aged children were finishing primary school and 85.8% finished high school (10th grade); the GER for tertiary education (which includes all accredited

colleges, universities and technical diploma programs) had risen to 28.4%, encompassing over 43 million students in higher education across the country (World Bank 2022; Ministry of Education 2024). By 2017, 1 in 3 of all 15-34 year olds listed their primary occupation as 'student' (CSDS-KAS 2017).

That these crucial indicators of the country's economic development should coincide with the coming-of-age of the largest youth cohort in the world, with 600 million Indians aged under 25 in 2021, was – especially to a certain set of India's English-speaking urban political and business elite – all the more favorable evidence of the nation's coming good fortunes (Rajan et al. 2021; UNSD 2020). With a median age of just 28.7 in 2022, and 1 million people turning old enough to work every month, India's population is so young and so large that it is projected to account for one-fourth of *global* working age population growth through the first half of 21st century (Dobbs et al. 2012).

The prospect of a huge working-age population with relatively better education, and relatively fewer dependents, spurred immense optimism about a "demographic dividend" supercharging the country's economic development in the new century. Indian policymakers and international observers alike anticipated that this population boom would set in motion a virtuous cycle of increased national savings, investment, and economic growth as they entered the workforce (Rajan et al. 2012; Sengupta 2009; Mehrotra et al. 2014). Mainstream media narratives went even further than standard demographic theory to claim, as one 1999 *Businessweek* cover story did, that this *particular* generation of Indian youth – portrayed as confident, tech savvy, and conversant with the global economy – embodied a spirit of enlightenment and modernity unlike any who preceded them:

> "As this group, with its more materialist, more globally informed opinions, comes into its own, sociologists predict India will gradually abandon the austere ways and restricted

> markets that have kept it an economic backwater. These youth will demand a more cosmopolitan society that is a full-fledged member of the global economy. They will start their own businesses and contribute to a more vibrant economy. They also are likely to demand more accountability from their politicians." (Kripalani 1999)

The 21st century was poised to be the Indian century, then, an era when the country would reap its trifecta of sustained economic growth, youth, and human capital – a dream encapsulated in the 2004 political slogan "India Shining." But newfound optimism about India's new "found" (Kripalani 1999) generation soon collided against grimmer realities thrown up by India's labor markets. For all its decades of rapid, continuous economic growth – averaging over 7% since 2000 – the Indian economy simply did not generate enough jobs of the sort that could integrate tens of millions of newly educated, young workers into the modern economy (Saraf 2016). Specifically, formal employment in India's organized sector – which offers vastly better pay, benefits, and worker protections than informal employment alternatives – grew at a tepid pace while the workforce rapidly became younger, larger, and more educated.

	Populations of Indian Workers	**1991**	**2000**	**2011**
A	Total Workforce (in millions)	323.9	396.9	463.7
	With post-secondary degrees & above	*12.7*	*21.9*	*36.4*
B	Total Employment in Organized Sectors (in millions)	26.8	28.0	28.9
	Public Sector	*19.1*	*19.3*	*17.5*
	Private Sector	*7.7*	*8.7*	*11.4*
C	Deficit of Org. Sector Jobs (A - B)	297.1	368.1	434.8
D	Organized Sector Share of Total Employment (B as % of A)	8.3%	7.1%	6.2%
	As share of college educated workers	*211%*	*128%*	*79%*

Table 1: Population Size of India's Workforce vs. Total Organized Sector Employment, 1991-2011[22]

[22] Data Sources: Economic Survey of India (2012), Census of India (2011).

Table 1 compares the growth of India's overall workforce against total employment in the organized sectors. While 140 million people were added to the workforce between 1991 and 2011, organized sector employment grew by only 2 million,[23] resulting in an "excess" of 435 million informal workers over the formal sector workforce. Total organized sector employment fell 7.5 million jobs short of even the elite minority of workers with at least a college degree – a qualification that was by no means necessary for work in the country's public sector enterprises (Economic Surveys of India 1991-2012).

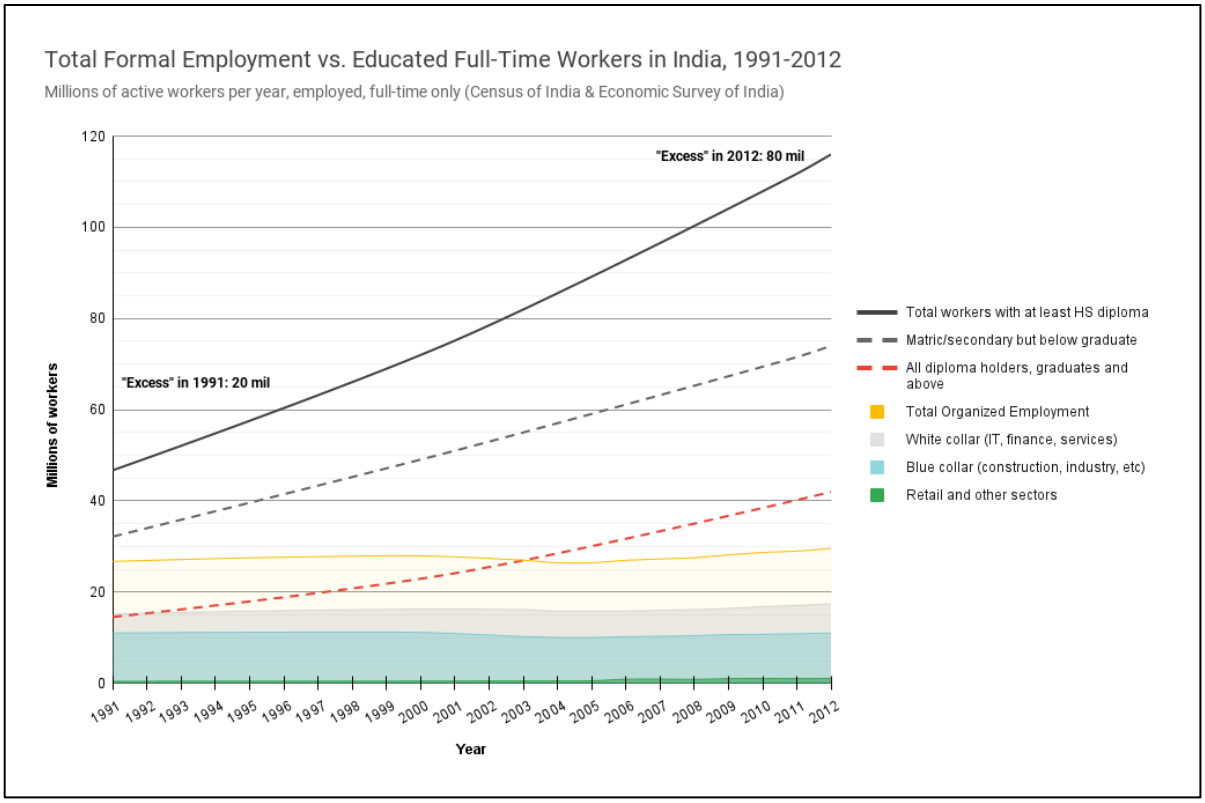


Fig. 1: Educated Full-Time Workers plotted against Total Organized Sector Employment[24]. By

[23] For all the hype generated by the growth of outsourcing in India, formal private sector employment was limited and struggled to offset the reduction of public sector jobs initiated by economic liberalization.
[24] When Indian youth speak of "jobs" and "employees", they are usually referring specifically to this category of rationalized, full-time roles in organized sectors subject to formal contracts, official labor regulations and, usually, some type of educational credential requirements. They usually do not refer to the far more widespread forms of precarious employments in the vast, unregulated informal economy.

2012, there were 80 million more workers with at least a high school degree in India than the total number of jobs in organized sectors as education rose but formal job creation stayed flat.

In India, only the organized sector guarantees formal, contractual protections for workers, such as legal recourse when employers engage in wage theft or abusive practices. In the United States, contractual employment is a feature of virtually all jobs, good and bad. Even employers hiring at the lowest end, like gas stations and fast food restaurants, are legally obliged to pay their workers at least minimum wage – and even though abusive practices frequently do occur, they are nevertheless in violation of the law (Roychowdhury 2018).

This is not the case with the vast majority of employment in India, which by definition does not regulate "unorganized" or "informal" enterprises at all – apart from requiring them to pay tax and avoid extreme human rights violations, such as sexual trafficking and slavery (Roychowdhury 2018; Sengupta et al. 2009; Sampark 2011). The standard reasoning for such lax regulations in Indian law was that the informal sector represented the "outdated," caste-based occupational arrangements typically associated with "backward areas," underdevelopment and "old India" (e.g. Das 2000). This included a vast range of economic activity from farmers, village artisans, migrant laborers, and other economic activities captured under the categories of "self-employed" (Sengupta et al. 2009). As the nation became developed, and education enlightened its populace – or so the theory went – these old world ways of working would naturally give way to the modern, organized sphere of formal markets (Majumdar 2008; NCEUS 2009; Planning Commission 2012).

But such a transformation never arrived. The table and figure above highlight how even as India's highly educated workforce tripled in size during three decades of rapid economic growth, organized employment *shrank* as a share of the workforce, regardless of education levels. While in 1991 there were more than 2 organized sector jobs for every worker with higher education,

that ratio dropped to just 0.8 by 2011 – exacerbated further by an absolute reduction in public sector employment, which guaranteed non-discriminatory hiring. Although these trends only worsened in the ensuing decades, they are not possible to illustrate with specificity because the Indian government mysteriously stopped publishing data on employment in organized sectors after 2012. Nevertheless job openings, especially in the public sector, became spectacular events that illustrated the sheer numbers of educated Indian youth seeking work. In 2015, for instance, openings for a few hundred minimally-paid "peons" in government offices received 2.3 million applications (Pradhan 2015). The job required only a 4th grade education but hundreds of PhD holders and several thousand post-graduates applied anyway. The 2015 episode made international headlines but became par for the course in ensuing years[25].

This reduction in public sector employment combined with explosive growth in education levels is precisely why the Indian job market today represents dysfunction on such maddening scale. Virtually all Araku students aimed for government jobs, with their promise of developmental citizenship regardless of one's background. But so did everyone else except the upper-caste, upper crusts of the urban elite. The absolute decline in public sector employment, meanwhile, could only have meant inexorably rising labor market pressures when combined with explosive growth in the pool of public sector job applicants, driven by the twin forces of a demographic boom and educational inclusion after the 1980s. The tallies of Organized Sector Employment in the Economic Survey of India from 1991 to 2012 clearly show that even twenty years of rapid economic growth and historic social policy victories did not result in significant creation of good, organized sector jobs. Moreover, public sector employment actually *declined*

[25] E.g. see coverage in Hemrani, Nikhil (2018), "The jobs in India that attract thousands of applicants," *BBC,* 3 June 2018 < https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20180601-the-jobs-in-india-that-attract-millions-of-applicants> and in "Want One of India's Best Jobs? You and 1,800 Other Applicants," *NY Times,* 28 June 2023 < https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/28/world/asia/india-workforce-economy.html>.

as both state and central governments slashed or liberalized the same government jobs that millions of first-generation graduates across Indians still considered their best, if not only shot at a life of freedom, stability and respect.

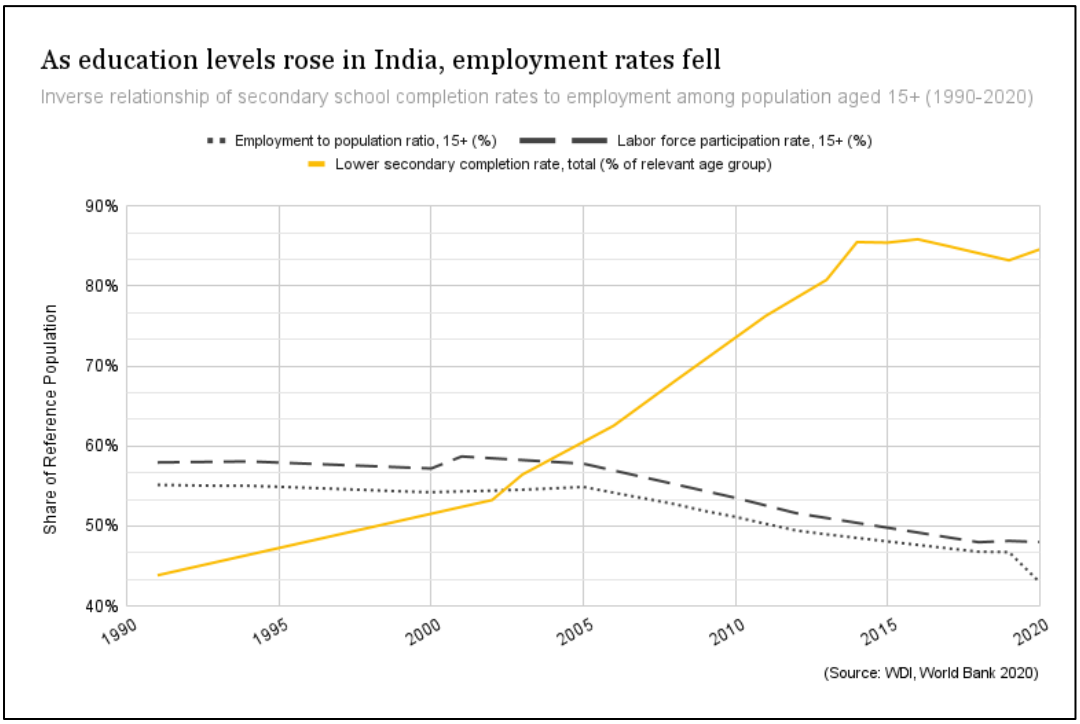


Fig. 2: Unemployment, labor force participation, and education levels in India, 1990-2020.

Indeed, Indian politicians continue to stoke the promise of government jobs in their electoral promises of bringing development to their districts, further dividing an already shrinking and vastly insufficient pot among more and more groups of their constituents (public sector employment fell to 3.8% of the workforce in 2012 from 5.9% in 1992). For instance, in 2023 the BJP government introduced a new reservation for "Economically Weaker Sections" as a sop to upper castes revolting against public sector affirmative action policies to the poor (Yadav 2021). In parliamentary debates over rampant youth employment, BJP ministers categorically ruled out using public sector employment to offset rampant youth unemployment, arguing that law entitled public employees to so many rights and benefits that the government could no longer afford to

make new hires (Lok Sabha 2014). Instead, it was now the state's duty to train underemployed youth in the skills necessary to be "job ready" in the modern global economy (Lok Sabha 2016).

Sector	Share of GDP in 2013-14 (%)	Share of Employment in 2011-12 (%)	Employment Growth between 2005-10 (%)
Traditional Employers	*31.1%*	*61.5%*	
Agriculture and allied activities	18.2	48.9	-8.2
Manufacturing	12.9	12.6	-6.3
Low Value Added	*20.3%*	*22.2%*	
Trade, repair, hotels and restaurants	12.0	11.6	4.5
Construction	8.3	10.6	70.0
High Value Added	*26.4%*	*7.7%*	
Transport, storage, communication and broadcasting services	6.6	5.2	10.8
Financial, insurance, real estate and business services	19.8	2.5	31.4

Table 2: Economic sectors in India by share of GDP, employment, and job growth. (Reproduced from Saraf 2016).

Nor was there much evidence that many Indians who did find work had moved into the more productive, "new economy" jobs invoked in stories of IT parks in Bangalore and Mumbai. Nearly 92% of all workers remained in informal or unorganized sector jobs in 2017-18 – an even

larger share than it was in 1991 (Murthy 2019). While employment in agriculture and manufacturing declined precipitously in recent decades, only a slim minority of the workforce wound up in "high value added" fields like telecom and finance (Table 2).

Bad Jobs and the Modern Informal Economy

But there are other jobs besides public sector employment in India; there are even formal sector jobs with the same contractual benefits and even better pay in the private sector. The question then becomes why don't more of those young job seekers apply for formal sector roles too. Economists studying the phenomenon of "jobless growth" in India have pointed to a range of factors that limited formal job creation in the decades following liberalization, even as the country's economy prospered. Between 1990 and 2010, Indian industry as a whole became more capital-intensive at the expense of job creation, depriving workers the benefits of prodigious output growth and record profits – especially in the manufacturing sector (Kannan and Raveendran 2009; Tejani 2016).

Furthermore, much of the economic growth during this period was driven by digital service sectors such as IT, finance and insurance – which, as Saraf (2016) points out, had outsized influence in India's growth narrative but created relatively few jobs in absolute terms. For example, traditional employers and low value added sectors like construction accounted for over 80% of the employment share in 2012 but only half of the GDP. High value added fields like finance and IT, on the other day, accounted for a 26% (and growing) share of output but employed just 8% of the workforce. This meant that as India's economic output and productivity rose, and the education levels of its workforce grew, so did joblessness and underemployment.

Most new employment emerged in unorganized arrangements within highly globalized

sectors like construction, food service, and other modern service industries. It was far cry from the visions of a "demographic dividend" promised to India's "chosen generation" – but, more importantly, indicated that the informal economy no longer constituted "old world" jobs (if it ever did) as Indian elites still imagined. Qualitative studies revealed how the acute shortage of jobs was particularly devastating for upwardly mobile students from underprivileged backgrounds. Universities and colleges became sites of "time pass" where disadvantaged students perpetually extended their studies as they spent years looking for a job (Jeffrey 2010). Faced with few legitimate options and unable to return to the "family business," educated youth in India's smaller cities increasingly turned to organized crime, scams and frauds in order to make a living (Poonam 2018).

The upshot of these trends was that the symbolic cultural promise of "real development" made available to all Indians through formal sector employment increasingly became just that – a symbol. It was no longer a promise, but effectively a lottery, just as truly democratic claims to developmental citizenship became possible through the inclusion of ambition lower-caste youth like Prem and Esu for the first time in history. This wasn't always the case. Public-sector employment, especially, was once a real pathway to economic prosperity for many privileged post-colonial Indian families, including my own. As Table 1 also shows, government employment in 1991 was much more widespread than the total number of higher educated Indian workers. Stable public jobs were readily available back then – if you were lucky enough to be qualified, which only the privileged few were.

My family would have never enjoyed these intergenerational successes had they faced the same lottery-like chances for modest government employment 50 years ago – and today they no longer have to because most have moved onwards to secure lives in rich nations abroad, or

remained in India as beneficiaries of the 21st century private sector economy. The family narrative, as with other upper caste Indians, celebrates this trajectory as the fruits of hard work and merit overcoming the enormous difficulties of life in an impoverished country. While there is certainly plenty of truth to that tale, it nevertheless remains the case that the greatest symbolic achievements of my extended kin – landing lucrative careers in Google and Facebook, or admission into Ivy League PhD programs – were at least *an order of magnitude less difficult for us* than getting hired as a primary school instructor currently is for tribal "reservation candidates" in Araku Valley.

Empirical Case: The Great Indian Skills Crisis?

Identifying the Skills Crisis

Predominant theories of unemployment range in their focus from aggregate demand-side explanations like globalization and technological change to supply-side factors like social disparities in preferences and human capital (Goldin and Katz 2008; Autor 2015; Dwyer 2013; Collins 2019). But ink is spilled over the problem of joblessness and unproductive youth beyond the academy as well. As a policy arena, public discourse on unemployment tends to reside in one of the broadest tents of its kind, constantly animated with activity from policymakers, business interests, schools and training institutes, media houses, labor unions, social movements, and so on. These many various actors, with their distinct agendas, at times compete and other times cooperate to come to some understanding of how unemployment is appropriately defined, diagnosed, and institutionally remediated.

It was in this segment of the policy arena that, in the years following the 2008 global financial crisis, a new version of events began to circulate in the pages of business papers, on

prime time news debates, economic summits, and other outlets representing the Indian business class. This version of events did not downplay the extent of India's employment crisis, but instead reframed the problem in terms of the *employability* of the jobless: "By 2022, we will have 100 million people unable to get jobs due to lack of skills. This is an enormous number and an area that needs a lot of focus," said the chairman of a major Bangalore-based outsourcing firm in 2018 (Hindu Businessline 2018).

Between 2007 and 2020, company spokespersons took to editorials, prime time news debates, and conference stages to urge immediate action against what they characterized as a crippling "skills deficit" that was driving mass unemployment while dampening industrial productivity, economic growth and foreign investment (Bellman and Range 2008). "Despite the emphatic stress laid on education and training in this country," wrote the CEO of a digital education company in a 2017 *Hindustan Times* editorial, "there is still a shortage of skilled manpower and the lack of technical and soft skills, resulting in an urgent and growing need to make young Indians job-ready to address the mounting needs and demands of the industry" (Pant 2017). Industry-funded studies on the "skill levels" of the Indian workforce made headlines with alarming findings such as, "Every year, thousands of engineering graduates pass out of college, but only a tiny handful of them are trained in the skills that employers need now. Over 80 percent of them are unemployable for any job in the knowledge economy" (India Today 2019).

India's corporate class was joined in its crusade by the highest echelons of state officials and senior politicians from all major political parties. The prevailing government attitude was bluntly captured by Manohar Parrikar, Indian Minister for Defense, when he remarked at a 2016 'Job Creation Summit' in New Delhi, "I don't think employment is that big of a problem. It is actually [the] employable population that is a big problem" (Wadhwani Foundation 2016). This

view echoed arguments put forth by "India Inc." that pinned the blame squarely on the inadequate skills of Indian workers, arguing that Indian workers were too unemployable to be hired for modern jobs, and that such a nationwide "skills gap" was hampering corporate plans for new investment and growth.

"Skill Development" as Discourse

But as Indian elites debated what to do with the unskilled young people coming of age, they had to first come to some understanding about what it meant to be skilled. This meant that advocates of the reskilling perspective had to articulate why a skills gap came into being, and how a national skills development policy could avert the Indian economy from crisis. They had to define who was skilled (or not), and what counted as skilled (or not). They had to develop new hierarchies of ability that not only codified the distinctions between the skilled and unskilled, but also between advanced skill levels and more remediate ones. They had to identify which occupations would face shortages of skilled workers and which ones could be ignored. And, ultimately, they had to develop a host of new policies, industry practices, and tools of measurement to diagnose and resolve apparent human capital shortages.

Crucially, they also had to substantiate these claims with technologies of measurement that not only quantified the extent of the skills shortage among current and future workers, but also categorized relevant *skills* by their expected value in the 'new' economy. The choice and design of these measurement technologies inevitably involved classification decisions that inevitably "valorize[d] some point of view and silence[d] another" (Bowker and Star 2000:5). Lastly, they had to develop a vast infrastructure of training institutes, standardized curricula, and digital platforms that incorporated these ideas into practice.

These questions drove the production of an enormous body of economic knowledge and narratives of skill in India, which began in the lead up to the first national skill development policy and continues to the present day. This new knowledge took the form of large-scale statistical surveys, policy reports, occupational standards, legal frameworks, primetime news debates, and elite conference panels (e.g. ILO 2004, Aspiring Minds 2013; Planning Commission 2014). They were also the product of frequent collaborations between state planners, academic experts, international organizations, industry groups, and consulting firms (e.g World Economic Forum 2014 & 2016; Wadhwani Foundation 2016; *CII India Skills Report* 2020).

Thus, state planners consulted academics on official statistical estimates of "unskilled" workers in the informal sector, and then hired management consultants to translate those estimates into numerical projections of "skills gaps" across sectors (KPMG 2017). Business lobbying groups collaborated with universities and international organizations on studies and policy reports decrying India's low skill levels (Majumdar 2008; Mehrotra 2014, World Bank 2008; British Council & ILO 2014; FICCI 2015; Manpower Group 2018). Public-private partnerships developed thousands of training syllabi and standards for the new, privately-run "skill development" centers now mushrooming across India (NSDC 2020).

Such efforts precipitated in India's passing of the largest national skill development program in world history, twice – once in 2009 under an INC-led government and again in 2015 under the BJP. The National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, as the 2015 edition was called, came with aggressive mandates to train, certify, and set occupational standards for the 400 million Indian workers it said "possess[ed] little to no job skills," especially those that would be demanded by the so-called "jobs of the future" (*NPSDE* 2015).

The well-funded policies called for a massive expansion of new vocational education

programs, with explicit roles for the private sector in designing training syllabi, advising the government on changing trends in the demand for "skilled manpower" in India and abroad, and establishing thousands of new vocational education centers chartered by the government (Min. of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship 2015). They enshrined an official view of "skills" as the main variable separating mass unemployment in India from widespread job creation, productivity gains, and sustained economic growth. And they sought to remediate the yawning "skills gap" between the abilities of Indian workers and the needs of Indian (and global) employers through mass retraining and certification programs that would break the "vicious cycle" of low skilled labor, and convert India into the "human resources capital of the world" (Modi 2015).

Data and Methods

With so many young people who were more globalized and better schooled than ever entering labor markets, a majority of Indians were exercising a form of *choice* in schooling and work that the caste system had stifled among oppressed, "backwards" castes for thousands of years. Inevitably, their actions put to task old policy paradigms *and* reigning cultural models linking education, employment, and good citizenship – as they came from a time when both formal education and formal employment largely remained the preserve of the roughly 15% of Indians in the upper castes, while the India's 85% Bahujan majority were stuck with "traditional" roles in the unorganized sector[26].

[26] Based on estimates from the Bihar Caste Survey (ET 2023). Multiple governments have controversially sidestepped demands for a nation-wide caste census (Starr & Sahgal 2021; Varghese & Kumar 2024).

Data: Building the India Skill Discourse Corpus

Because these policies and measures define in more concrete terms who and what counts as a skilled worker, they make it possible to deconstruct an otherwise amorphous discursive concept such as "skill." To examine how conceptions of "skills" are defined, contested, problematized, and ultimately institutionalized, I assembled and analyzed a large corpus of policy debates, reports and legal documents pertaining to Skill Development in India.

The 344 documents included in the final analysis of this corpus were gathered in 2020 and 2021 through four sequential means. I first conducted a keyword search on mainstream media, academic and government databases to find discourse on "skills" as well as arguments made in favor or against[27]. I also looked up and downloaded any reports or speeches referenced in multiple texts. And since skill development/TVET was a policy concern since the early days of independence, I included historical World Bank and Indian policy documents, as well as similar policies in other countries, for background.

Group	Speakers	Description of data	Data Sources
International Organizations	ILO staff and members, World Bank staff, OECD, UNESCO, ADB	ILO Convention Resolutions, Policy Briefs, working papers, Conference proceedings, debate transcripts, policy recommendations	ILO and other official websites
Indian Government	Ministers, MPs, Senior skill development bureaucrats, expert committees	Legislation, policy reports, speeches by government officials, official gov't studies, Parliamentary debates,	India Kanoon database; Indian government ministry websites
Indian Industry	Corporate execs, HR managers, industry groups, consultancies	Op-eds in newspapers, industry-funded reports & policy studies, WEF panels, primetime business news debates	Youtube, Proquest, Google
Media	Business papers & TV broadcasters in India and abroad	News coverage of skill shortages and skill development policies in Economic Times, Bloomberg, The Wire, The Hindu, Business Standard, Hindustan Times, Wall Street Journal, etc.	Proquest; Youtube

[27] **Keywords**: Skill Development, Skill Gap, Skill India, Skilling. Job Training. Demographic Dividend, Employability, Youth Unemployment.

Academia	Indian policy scholars; TVET specialists; American economists	Scholarship on skill development policy and recommended best practices, as well as critiques, etc in EPW, Journal of Empirical Research in VET, J-SAD	Jstor, Google Scholar
Keywords: "Skills"; "Skill Development"; "Skill India"; "education jobs"; "job training"; "vocational education"			

Table 3: Overview of documents analyzed by source, speakers, and data description

My methodology is elaborated further in Appendix A. This corpus attempts to trace the emergence of the "skill" *concept* as a developmental idea that took hold of India's English-speaking policy world in the late 2000s. It broadly captures the idea's popularity in India over time, the range of speakers adopting it in conversations about Indian development, and most importantly the meanings and claims the term helps them deploy. Table 3 summarizes the documents analyzed for this chapter.

Discursive Analysis Methods for the India Skill Discourse Corpus

A discursive analysis of the skill concept, I argue, provides invaluable insights into the struggle to restore or renegotiate the cultural scaffolds behind those implicit social arrangements. Thus, a discursive corpus of the "skill" concept is a textual dataset that can tell us *who* was talking about skill in India, *what* social meanings are implied when they employ terms like "skilled" or "unskilled," and their claims to *why* they engage in skills discourse at that moment. What, then, are the cultural politics of supposedly technical claims like "It is actually the employable population that is the problem" (Wadhwani Foundation 2016)? The first step is to determine *when* the concept of "skills/skill development" became a significant feature of Indian public policy discourse, *who* was participating in talk about skills and *who* was consciously left out. The next step which of these perspectives are ultimately enshrined in legal definitions of skill and occupational standards.

The following sections contain the results of my analysis of how state and corporate actors articulated the Indian skills crisis both in speech and in practice, paying close attention to differences in 1) how relevant populations are identified; 2) how desirable "skills" are defined; and 3) how progress on skill development is evaluated against the backdrop of educational expansion in India. By examining how people are thus sorted, I argue, we can better understand how a labor market crisis is socially produced.

Results

One Unbroken Alliance, Two Completely Different Ways of Seeing

Figure 3 illustrates the *recent* and abrupt rise of the "skills" concept in the Indian developmental discourse, in sharp contrast to the long-standing public debates over jobs and education it seeks to influence. The notion of a "severe shortage of skilled manpower in our country" (NPSDE 2015) did not seem to concern Indian policymakers prior to 2008, despite the fact that the educated workforce was only smaller before then.

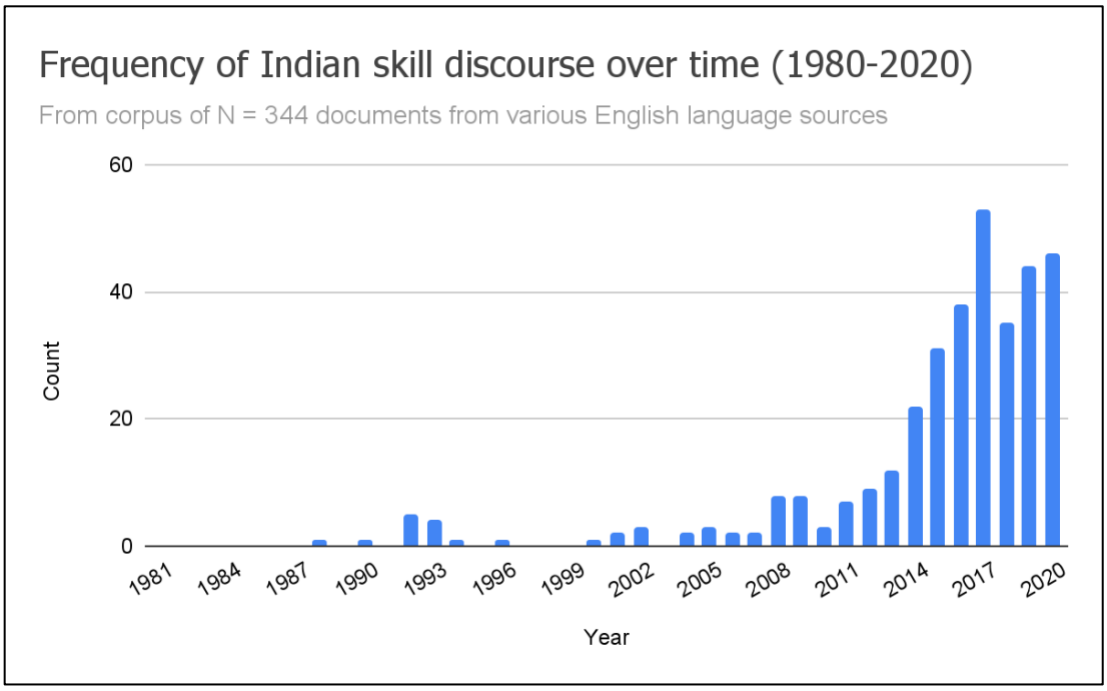


Fig. 3: Frequency of Indian skill discourse over 1980-2020, based on 344 archival documents gathered.[28]

By the late 2000s, a new consensus emerged among India's political and business elites, like members of parliament and corporate executives, that not only is India's crippling "skills shortage" responsible for persistent youth unemployment, but the poorly trained and badly educated workforce makes it impossible for businesses to hire the talented employees they need to expand operations, jeopardizing national economic growth in turn. This narrative blamed mass unemployment on a "skills gap" between the economic opportunities supposedly afforded by India's growing economy and "large sections of the conventionally educated youth, who possess little or no job skills" (NPSDE 2015).

Those who argued in favor of a 'skills crisis' generally argued that the country needed to urgently attend to its skills crisis in order to ensure continued economic growth, or else face far worse sociopolitical ramifications in the near future. In the words of one ruling party

[28] Please check Appendix A for more details on how a comprehensive search for Indian skill development discourse was made.

parliamentarian during a 2016 debate, “We need skill because there is a severe shortage of skilled manpower in our country. In spite of the fact that India is host to the largest youth population in the world, we have so far failed to extract the demographic dividend of our youth population. So, we have to be very careful in the rhetorical exercise of ‘Make in India’ or ‘Skilled India’ and see that our demographic dividend should not get translated into a demographic burden” (MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, *Lok Sabha* 2016).

The vast majority of skills discourse from two sets of speakers: policymakers/official state documents, and corporate executives – especially HR reps, in a “skill development” discourse overwhelmingly occurred after 2008. At first glance, government and business elites appeared to not only hold complementary understandings of India’s human capital shortages as driving youth unemployment, but also shared similar visions of what a “Skilled India” would achieve. Both groups emphasized common themes of inclusive growth, demographic change, and India’s potential future as a global exporter of “human talent.”

In a 2015 speech announcing the revamped Skill India mission, for instance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proclaimed that “the world needs skilled people. There is a huge job market out there…If China is like a 'manufacturing factory' of the world, India should become the 'human resource capital' of the world” (Modi 2015). Similarly, a recent edition of the *India Skills Report* argued that "what we must focus on is to promote the development of Indians into not just global citizens – who can readily adopt a cross-cultural philosophy, but also global professionals – who can leverage the latest technological developments and adapt to the best practices shared by their global peers…This will eventually make our personnel important contributors not only to the world but also to the Indian economy” (CII *India Skills Report* 2020).

Policymakers and employers therefore not only began to talk of major skill shortages around

the same time, but their respective discourses worked to mutually complement and legitimate each other. Parliamentarians citied the *India Skills Report* in legislative debates while business executives heaped praise on the government for taking skill development seriously (Lok Sabha 2018; NDTV 2016). The authors of *India Skills Report*, in return, took specific pains to signal their fidelity to the "vision of the Hon'ble Prime Minister, Narendra Modi" and the National Policy on Skill Development; the 2020 edition, for instance, included a section of detailed statistics on major Skill India initiatives and a profile of government skill development efforts in the power sector (*India Skills Report* 2020).

Yet from these debates emerged two competing ideas about who a skilled worker was (or wasn't), and how skills could be measured across the labor force. Governmental elites coalesced around what I call an *administrative* understanding of skill, inherited from the country's obsolete and underfunded vocational education system, which defined skilled workers as those who were credentialed by an officially recognized training institute – a definition that, crucially, excluded even holders of a 12th grade education. Business elites, meanwhile, pushed forward a more *behavioral* definition of skilled workers as those assessed as "employable" by either employers or standardized tests. Both approaches borrowed similar language and concepts from economics and international organizations -- terms like "skill development," "employability," and "lifelong learning" -- and would surface during the same debates over the national skill gap. They both engaged statistical measures that enabled them to quantify a skill "shortage" in the workforce and make comparisons with international standards. And they were both motivated by an underlying belief in the need to urgently bridge India's skills gap.

Notably missing from data are virtually *any* representatives of the hundreds of millions of Indian workers, students and unemployed youth marked unskilled and unemployable. Labor

unions, student groups and grassroots youth movements are enormously active in protesting the lack of job opportunities for unemployed graduates; their frequent demonstrations not only earn routine coverage in the international media[29] but are widely seen as a powerful political force[30]. In other words, there is no shortage of English-language discourse by these groups on the topics of employment and education. This makes it all the more intriguing that even after a concerted search, I was unable to locate any commentary by labor or student spokespersons on "skills", "skill development", "skill shortage" or "unemployability" – not even as a negative critique of the policy ideas advanced by the Indian state and business class.

Table 4 summarizes the "Administrative" and "Behavioral" types of skills discourse which we will presently examine in further detail.

Scoping Conditions	***Administrative Vision of Skill***	***Behavioral Vision of Skill***
Relevant Actors	Government elites, parliamentarians, senior bureaucrats, official studies	Business elites, human resource consultants, corporate executives, industry reports
Skilled Worker Definition	"Formal training": Credentialed graduates of officially recognized vocational education programs	"Employability": higher education graduates [knowledge but also personal traits, behavioral competence, soft skills]
"Skilled" jobs of future	Low-wage service sector jobs like retail, some manufacturing, minor entrepreneurship	Corporate professionals at high-end, platform and gig workers at low-wages
Ways of Measurement	National sample survey measures of formal vocational training	Standardized aptitude tests privately administered to college students and recent graduates
Problem Population	Low-income and rural youth, dropouts without college or vocational diplomas, informal sector workers	Current graduates of Indian universities, engineering colleges, and business schools, educated but underemployed

[29] E.g. *Wall Street Journal*, "India's Unusual Jobs Math: More Education Equals a Higher Chance of Unemployment" by Vibhuti Agarwal on 3 April 2024.
[30] See "First-time voters want govt. to create jobs, develop infrastructure" in *The Hindu* on 26 April 2024.

		youth
Solutions	Massive expansion of vocational education through national skill development policy, formal credentialing of informal workers	Higher education reform, app-based online training programs designed by individual firms
Key Terminology	"Demographic dividend," "skills gap," "knowledge economy," "formally acquired skills", "lifelong learning," "competencies", 2022	"Demographic dividend," "skills gap," "knowledge economy," "employability", "learnability," "competency", 2022

Table 4: Differences between the "administrative" and "behavioral" logics of skill development in India

The Administrative Vision of Skill Development

In attempting to define the "skilled" segment of the overall Indian workforce – and, conversely, describe the contours of the country's skill gap – Indian government officials drew on formal, bureaucratic notions of skill that had been inherited from the country's dilapidated system of vocational education. State actors gradually recast old measures of vocational training as contemporary measures of "skill," and in the process instilled fixed ideas about how skilled workers could and could not be classified. The National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO) periodic estimates of vocational training, in particular, became representative of these efforts.

Measuring vocational training in India

Along with other socioeconomic indicators such employment and consumption, the NSSO had long published data on Indian workers with diplomas or certificates from "state/central government, public sector or other reputed recognised" training programs (Agrawal and Agrawal 2017). For most of modern Indian history, however, the only officially recognized vocational institutes were the country's Industrial Training Institutes and Centers (ITIs and ITCs), a system of trade schools established in 1950 primarily to train workers for India's newly-established

public sector industries (MSDE 2016).

Although these state-run vocational training centers had been set up with the ambition of cultivating "a technical and industrial attitude in the minds of the younger generations" in the newly independent nation, they were beleaguered by underfunding and underutilization from the start (Maithreyi et al. 2017). Even as more ITIs were gradually built, they never developed the capacity to train more than a small fraction of the total Indian workforce, nor attract sufficient students; moreover, job prospects for ITI graduates were historically poor, especially in comparison to those with college degrees (FICCI 2009; World Bank 2008).

The upshot is that the NSSO's statistics on "formal vocational education" only counted the graduates of India's ITIs and ITCs, which always played a minor role in Indian higher education. The "formally trained" share of the population thus consistently hovered between 1-3 percent of the population for most of modern Indian history – in stark contrast to the rapid expansion of conventional schooling since the 1990s (Sharma and Suneja 2017; Agrawal and Agrawal 2017; Maitra and Maitra 2019).

Prior to the 2000s, low rates of formal vocational education prompted relatively little concern in the Indian government. The Five Year Plans that outlined the state's developmental agenda made scarce mention of vocational education, in sharp contrast to the way they meticulously tracked other indicators like maternal health and primary schooling. More importantly, for reasons mentioned above, the NSSO's measures of formal vocational training excluded any forms of "job training" that happened at home, as with family-based occupations, or in *any* non-vocational schools or colleges. That is, they simply did not capture the ways in which the vast majority of young people in India *did* prepare for the world of work -- nor did these metrics capture the profound transformations underway in those realms (Balagopal 1990).

During the late 2000s, however, Indian parliamentarians, bureaucrats, official reports and policies began to cite the same NSSO figures on vocational education as evidence of the alarmingly low levels of "skill" in the entire Indian workforce. The 11th Five Year Plan, published in 2008, included a chapter on skill development for the first time ever to indicate "that very few young persons actually enter the world of work with any kind of formal vocational training. This proportion of trained youth is one of the lowest in the world" (Planning Commission 2008).

In the context of elite anxiety over the skills shortage and demographic dividend, an arcane statistic about low attendance at some struggling Indian trade schools acquired powerful new meaning as a way of measuring this grave threat to the country's economic growth. Consider the following passage from a 2014 report on vocational education by the Planning Commission, then India's top economic planning agency:

> "While the opportunities are in terms of a demographic dividend, the challenges are posed by persisting skill gaps: *hardly 2 percent of the Indian workforce has formally acquired skills and another 2.4 per cent workers have some technical education*. It is estimated that nearly 291 million workers are required to be skilled by 2022 if India is to be a leading manufacturing economy in the world. *A drastic restructuring of the Indian VET has been suggested as one of the key conduits through which the persisting skills gaps could be plugged and inclusive growth could be pursued* in the midst of a demographic and structural economic transformation." (Planning Commission 2014)

Thus, according to the country's premier economic planning body, the country faced a vast shortage of skills because only 2 percent of the workforce was formally trained. And because a national shortage of skilled workers was what threatened the demographic dividend, a dramatic restructuring of vocational education therefore promised to secure India's future economic growth. The ambiguous concept of "skill levels" in the Indian workforce was now being interpreted through obsolete measures of vocational education, which in turn had been recast as authentic ways of seeing "skill" in the workforce.

Such a logic was by no means restricted to specialized bureaucratic reports. Rather, in many conversations occurring across the Indian government over "saving" the demographic dividend, statistics about the dismally unskilled Indian workforce emerged as a way of rationalizing anxieties over future economic growth around a specific vision of what an advanced industrial labor force should look like. In making a case for a skill development policy to the Indian parliament in 2015, Minister for Skill Development Rajiv Pratap Rudy again invoked "two percent" to contrast India with the more developed nations its leaders long sought to emulate:

> "Today 74 percent of the entire workforce of Germany is trained. Eighty percent of the workforce in Japan is skilled. In China, with a population of around 1.4 billion, 47 percent of its workforce is skilled. In Australia, this figure is 60 percent; in UK, it is 68 percent. Similarly, in South Korea, 96 percent of its workforce is skilled. *In India, just two percent of its workforce is skilled. If this is two percent, it is a real challenge. We have just started. We are late but we are not disappointed; we are not disheartened*." (MP Rajiv Pratap Rudy, *Lok Sabha* 2015).

By highlighting various national measures of skilled workforces, the minister was making the argument that, despite India's economy having already surpassed those of most advanced economies in size, India still had a long way to go before it became an advanced society *like* Australia or Germany. Even at the outset of the 21st century, far too few Indian workers – 2 percent, to be exact – possessed the skills necessary to enact such a societal transformation. Many more workers would therefore need to be given what those 2 percent already had: certified credentials from officially recognized institutions that were tailored, in the spirit of vocational education, to specific forms of work. Years of general schooling, college degrees, traditional apprenticeships, local knowledges -- all those efforts that Indian youth had already been pursuing on their own would no longer factor into this new calculus of skilling, unless they could be commensurate as part of a state-regimented training program.

In this section, I have examined the trajectory of one official statistic – the Indian

government's measure of formal vocational education among the population – in order to illustrate what I call the *Administrative Vision of Skill*. In this approach, state planners conceptualize the amorphous idea of workers' "skill" as a specific type of educational credential that can be administered through specially designated institutions, accredited by government bodies, and measured by official statistical organizations.

In developing the administrative vision, Indian state planners drew upon pre-existing practices of measuring vocational training, and in doing so excluded the vast majority of the workforce from official categorizations of skilled workers. Simultaneously, they embraced broader but more ambiguous ideas of which skills ought to be credentialed, sometimes drawing on popular rhetoric about the "knowledge economy" while other times describing conventional low-income service work like personal cooks and drivers. As I will show in the next section, the dual nature of the administrative vision – an expansive definition of *what* counted as skills coupled with narrow, credential-based criteria for *who* counted as skilled – was instrumental in resolving a major state priority: to identify a root cause of India's skill gap, and chart a way forward for salvaging the demographic dividend.

Modernizing Poor People

State officials consistently described the intended beneficiaries of skill development efforts as low-income dropouts and wage laborers toiling away in unproductive, menial work – and whom they contrasted with middle-class and wealthy Indians who could afford expensive private educations. KP Krishnan, the senior-most bureaucrat in the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, put this distinction bluntly while giving a talk on the NPSDE at an elite public policy school in Bangalore:

> "Typically skilling is *not for our children*. Skilling is for the children of our drivers, of

> our malis [gardeners], of our cooks, of you know...the invisible part of India. There is a lot of history to this. There is perhaps a lot of caste prejudice. There is a lot of sociology. But what is it that public policy can do to make skilling aspirational?" (Azim Premji University 2018).

The conceptual distinction he draws between "our children" and "the children of...the invisible part of India" clearly illustrates whom state officials problematized as the unskilled: poor, lower-caste service workers and their children, the "education rejects" (IIM Bangalore 2018). By contrast, college graduates -- especially urban, middle-class and upper caste elites -- had no need for skill development, and by the same virtue did not contribute to the skills shortage. In a similar vein, during parliamentary debates over the 2015 version of the NPSDE, parliamentarians in favor of the policy framed their support in terms of the exploitation the working poor and, at times, their unreliability when hired in service of urban elites. As one ruling party member expressed, "Sir, if we need a driver, the skill[ed] driver is not available. If a good plumber is needed then that too is not available. We don't even get a good cook. Take the case of Delhi, if a cook is needed, he is not available" (MP Anandrao Adsul, *Lok Sabha* 2015).

It is notable that in expressing his concern for the nation's shortage of skilled workers, the parliamentarian refers specifically to his frustrations over finding domestic workers – a set of "service economy" jobs deeply implicated with traditional caste hierarchies. On other occasions MPs explicitly mentioned caste-based occupational communities. During the same debate a parliamentarian from West Bengal added, "There are a lot of workers who are unskilled who make gold ornaments. These people are quite efficient but...because of the non-availability of the recognized certificate/degree, they are really very ill-fed. If we can put them under [a] Skill Development program and give a proper certification, they can have their own small enterprises" (MP Mamtaz Sanghamita, *Lok Sabha* 2015). Unskilled workers included the migrant laborer in Gulf nations who "does not know how to operate a microwave" or "operate a washing machine",

and ends up facing exploitation or imprisonment “because we have not given them training” (MP Rajiv Pratap Rudy, *Lok Sabha* 2016).

As the above statements illustrate, when Indian government officials spoke of the “unskilled,” they were rhetorically invoking the poor, predominantly rural and lower caste workers who either lacked post-secondary degrees or made up the informal sector workforce. Such statements attribute the poverty of lower caste, “traditional” sector workers to attributes that they themselves lacked or failed to possess – and diverted away from the greater structural conditions which denied them fair wages and opportunities.

S*killed* workers, by contrast, were those who had apparently become conversant with the demands of the modern global economy. "Millions and millions of Indian youth should acquire the skills which could contribute towards making India a modern country,” said Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a 2015 address launching his landmark “Skill India” initiative. “They must be in a position to face their counterparts in any corner of the world while keeping their heads high by virtue of their hard work and their dexterity of hands and win the hearts of people around the world through their skills" (Modi 2015).

This modernizing vision of skill development would also emerge in parliamentary debates, government reports, official statements and presentations advocating for state-sponsored skill development. By the mid-to-late 2000s, it became widely acknowledged that India was no longer following the path of manufacturing-led development. The ruling elites’ new vision was to transform the country into a “knowledge economy” whose large population would be its biggest asset in a flexible and technologically-demanding global economy. The Eleventh Five Year Plan, published under the previous government in 2008, described what this latest developmental trajectory entailed for skills:

> “As India moves progressively towards becoming a ‘Knowledge economy’ it becomes

> increasingly important that the Eleventh Plan should focus on advancement of skills and these skills have to be relevant to the emerging economic environment. In old economy, skill development largely meant development of shop floor or manual skills. Even in this area there are major deficiencies in our workforce which need to be rectified. *In new or knowledge economy the skill sets can range from professional, conceptual, managerial, operational behavioural to interpersonal skills and inter-domain skills.* In the 21st century as science progresses towards a better understanding of the miniscule, that is, genes, nano-particles, bits and bytes and neurons, knowledge domains and skill domains also multiply and become more complex...[the] Plan aims at launching a National Skill Development Mission which will bring about a paradigm change in handling of 'Skill Development' programmes and initiatives." (Planning Commission 2008)

Much as state actors defined a new category of the unskilled by conflating educational status (i.e. whether workers had received formal training or advanced education) with conditions of poverty, low productivity and economic backwardness, they envisioned *skilled* workers as those who had become conversant with the demands of the modern global economy – thanks to the new skill development policies of the government. "Millions and millions of Indian youth should acquire the skills which could contribute towards making India a modern country," said Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his 2015 "Skill India" address. "They must be in a position to face their counterparts in any corner of the world while keeping their heads high by virtue of their hard work and their dexterity of hands and win the hearts of people around the world through their skills" (Modi 2015).

By the time the first National Policy on Skill Development passed in 2009, Indian political elites routinely held up skill development as an *ipso facto* gateway to economic prosperity, modernity, and national pride; the speaker of Parliament, for instance, opened debate on the 2015 *NPSDE* with the following:

> "Keeping in view the commitment of the Union Government to promote the development of our country, which can be effectively realized through 'skill development', this House urges upon the Government to frame a comprehensive scheme providing for development of such technical skills amongst youth as would enable them to contribute towards making India a modern country and in achieving the goal of 'Make in India'." (*LS* 2015)

This modernizing vision of skill development would also emerge in parliamentary debates, government reports, official statements and presentations advocating for state-sponsored skill development. A striking illustration comes by way of a 2017 government presentation on skill development activities in the state of Andhra Pradesh, which included an effort to train women from remote tribal areas to manufacture LED lightbulbs (Fig. 6). One slide claims to show the "lifestyles" of the women before training, depicting them seated in a village of thatched roof huts, wearing traditional clothes. The next slide reveals the same women standing in an industrial facility, now donning crisp uniforms, name tags, and safety equipment:





Fig. 5 (a-b): From a 2017 presentation on "Initiatives Taken Up Under Skill Development," presented by the Tribal Welfare Department of the state government of Andhra Pradesh in Hyderabad. Note how the panels depict the lifestyles of tribal women before and after vocational training as alternatively primitive and modern, highlighting the transformative potential of skill development programs.

This later image, we are told, represents their "after" training lifestyle. Whether this juxtaposition of rural poverty and modern industry realistically depicts the women's experiences or not, the imagery nonetheless exemplified a widely-held belief in the radical potential of skill development: that it would lead not only to individual social mobility but also a collective process of societal transformation, in which India achieved its developmental potential by changing how its poor, undereducated masses worked.

Placing the Poor in the New Economy

If skilled, employable workers could be identified as those with vocational credentials, then the nation's "skill gap" could be quantified as well. In 2010, the Indian government contracted

the consulting firm KPMG to estimate the country's future skill gap in numerical terms. The firm analyzed employment trends in 24 major industries and projected they would together employ 109 million additional people by 2022 (KPMG 2017). The study concluded that all of those new jobs would demand "skilled manpower," even though, per its own estimates, most of this growth would occur in highly informal sectors like construction, beauty, and retail, where most existing workers do not have vocational training (and for which such programs had yet to exist).

To these estimates, the new Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship added its own projections that some 400 million Indian workers would need to be formally trained and certified by 2022. It arrived at this conclusion by estimating the total workforce in 2022 and simply subtracting the projected share of workers who were vocationally certified, college graduates, or over the age of 45. Everyone else -- nearly four-fifths of the entire working population -- was considered to "possess little or no job skills" unless they became formally trained (MSDE 2015).

The KPMG projections of "sector-wise shortages for skilled labour in India," meanwhile, revealed more about the political project that Skill India represented than they did about actual shortages of skilled workers in various segments of the economy. The vast majority of the expected demand for "skilled labor" falls in low-wage, low value added industries such as construction, beauty and wellness, and other service sectors (Fig. 5, in gray). These sectors, already the fastest growing in terms of employment, are characterized by high degrees of informality and precarity, as well as limited prospects for upward mobility (Deshpande 2007). More formalized and better paying industries like electronics manufacturing and telecom, meanwhile, account for a much smaller share of the overall training agenda (Fig. 5, in blue).

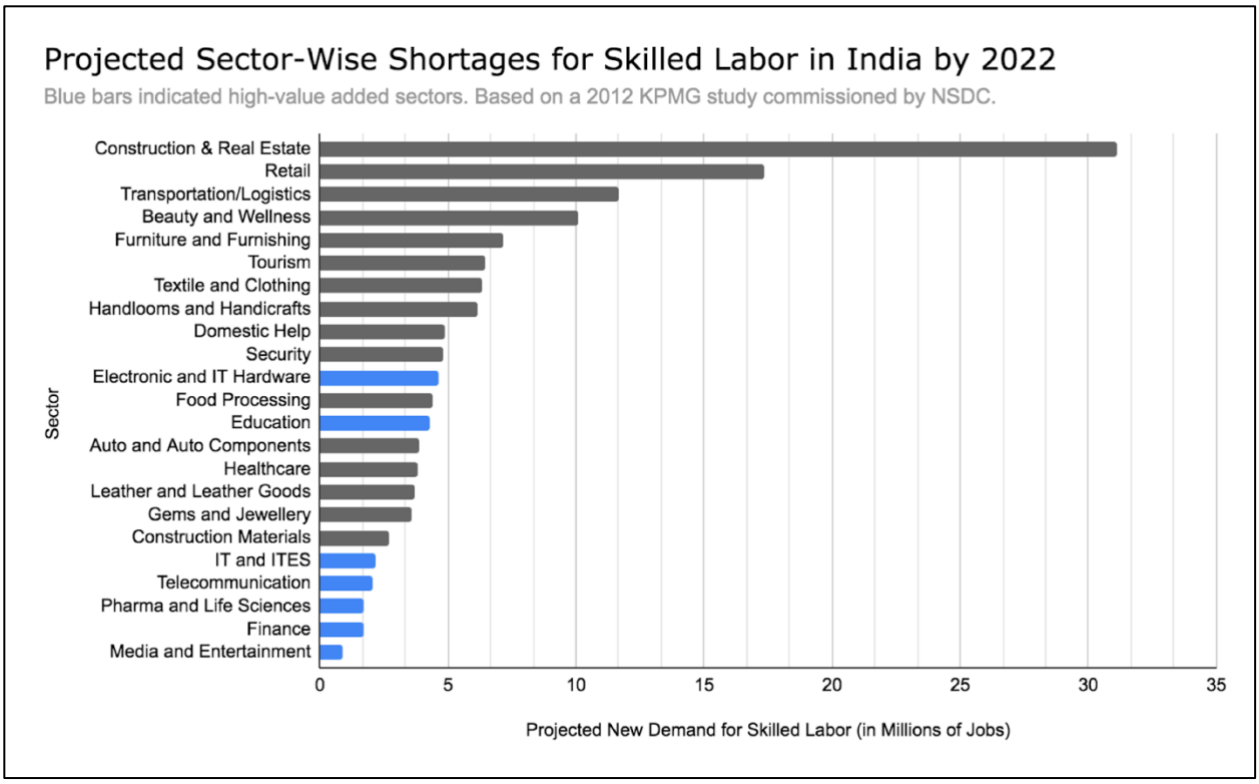


Fig. 4: Projected labor shortages by sector listed in the 2015 National Skill Development policy. Blue bars indicate high value-added sectors and gray bars indicate low value-added sectors. Assembled from National Skill Development Corporation estimates (KPMG 2017) *on projected "sector-wise shortages for skilled labor."*

What we can infer from these projections is that despite their emphasis on the looming "skills gap," political elites in India did not envision national skill development as a means for retraining undereducated and informal sector workers for "new economy" roles. Rather, they assume that all future employment growth in sectors like construction and retail will entail "skilled labor," even as existing jobs in those sectors are predominantly informal arrangements that would be marked "unskilled" by state definitions (see Appendix II in *NPSDE* 2015).

Despite the official framing of skill development as a means of imparting new, employable skills to the poor and chronically underemployed, government projections of the "skills gap" reveal that the steepest "shortages for skilled labor" by 2022 are in sectors already characterized by high levels of informal employment, low wages and job security, and little demand for formal

skills. The projected shortages, moreover, reflect expected demand for *all* labor by sector rather than skilled labor alone, which tells us that the expected skills gap is as much a justification of the government's massive skill development agenda, as it is a reflection of structural mismatch between employers and workers. After all, the sectors shown to face the largest demands for "skilled manpower" are ones that employ the largest numbers of workers, many of whom work informally without any benefits or formal training. Thus, the projected skills gap is also a claim characterized by ambiguity, as it simultaneously provides the official rationale for a skills shortage while sidestepping the inconvenient fact that well-paid, formal sector job creation was (and is) virtually non-existent in India.

Formalizing Vocational Training as "Skill"

The previous section demonstrated that state actors did not consider the education provided through high school sufficient for either imparting "technical skills" or producing skilled workers. A close examination of the first National Skill Development Policy in 2009 and the second National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship in 2015 reveals how Indian policymakers would instead define graduates of vocational training programs – ironically, one of the least popular educational choices with Indian students, and historically stigmatized as inferior to conventional education (Majumdar 2008) – as the "poor man's" ideal of modern, skilled workers. Their roles would not be in well-regulated, well compensated formal labor markets – a sector dominated by privileged castes – but in the vast informal economy.

As early as 2007, the *Report of the Sub-Committee on Vision for Vocational Education* argued that "vocational education represents the single most significant area in which education policy has to make a breakthrough," highlighting how skilling the nation necessitated a "coherent policy framework" that overhauled India's vocational education system with dramatic

expansions in vocational infrastructure and completely redesigned syllabi that would prioritize "the needs of the informal sector" (Kumar 2007). Accordingly, both national skill development policies mandated a massive state-funded expansion of India's existing system of vocational education in both its overall capacity for students and the kinds of courses being taught, while centralizing the system's overall governance. But as the flagship government efforts aimed at the country's putative skills crisis, the policies also effectively created a new category of skilled worker that did not exist before, trained and certified through the provisions specified in the law.

The 2015 *National Policy on Skill Development & Entrepreneurship*, for instance, encoded this ideal type of worker within its core objectives:

> "The core objective of the Policy is to empower the individual, by enabling her/him to realize their full potential through a process of *lifelong learning* where competencies are accumulated via instruments such as credible certifications, accumulation, and transfer."

The operative concepts in the passage above are "certification" and "credit"; together they reappear over 50 times in the relatively short text of the overall policy. The emphasis on certification follows from the official definitions of "skilled workers" laid out in both national skill development policies: skilled workers held "credible certifications" from formal, state-sanctioned vocational training programs, and as "empowered" workers they would keep accumulating new credentials to mark their ever expanding skill sets. This definition essentially reproduced the National Sample Survey Office's narrow method of only counting the 2% of Indian workers with vocational degrees in their surveys of the "formally trained" workforce, while discounting any other culturally important forms of occupational training (Agrawal and Agrawal 2018).

The Administrative Vision of Skill

The skill development policies simply adapted this standard definition of "formally trained" workers for the newly created official category of the "formally skilled." I call this way of defining skilled workers -- with its emphasis on vocational education, certification, and credential accumulation -- the *administrative* vision of skill. In envisioning a modern skilled workforce that would benefit from higher productivity and better job prospects, Indian policymakers gravitated towards a model of skill development that also suited their ambitions of increasing economic growth, foreign investment, and India's profile on the world stage.

By emphasizing vocational credentials and certification, they settled on a definition of skilled workers that was above all amenable to bureaucratic administration and record-keeping, easy measurement, and central monitoring. This is because the administrative vision of skill espoused by Indian political elites left no doubt that, in their eyes, a skilled worker was distinguished by her officially-recognized vocational credential and *only* by such a credential. Without it, more popular, alternative accounts of occupational ability and worth – including state-sponsored pathways like academic education as well as unregulated cultural practices like entering the family trade – could not officially qualify someone as a skilled worker nor, by convenient extension, legitimate their political demands for better employment.

More than simply defining skilled workers as those credentialed by the state, then, the administrative vision relied on state power to institutionalize a narrow ideal of occupational skill that held little cultural relevance in India, where vocational education was historically stigmatized, while diminishing the official status of popular alternative understandings of occupational training and worker competence. The double-headed nature of attempting to develop a skilled workforce, while simultaneously undermining actually existing practices of occupational skill, is one reason why the administrative vision of skill complicates the well-

publicized rationale of skill development that low skilled workers need to be taught new skills in order to remain competitive (e.g. *ILO* 2004, *ILO* 2008, *NCEUS* 2009). Another reason is that the national skill development policy's strict definitions of skilled, credentialed workers only work to identify *workers*.

By contrast, the underlying *skills* that these credentials presumably represent remain loosely specified in official records, which variously described "skill" as the ability to efficiently pursue goals – e.g., the "Vision of India 2020" planning report (Planning Commission 2002) – as personal abilities that fetch some market value (NSSO 2012), or as some other category of intangible human attribute. It is no small irony that despite mandating the creation of a staggering 400 million newly skilled workers – the largest single national skill development policy in world history – the 2015 *National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship* does not once provide a conceptual definition of "skill" anywhere in its 54 pages, even as it bemoans India's "paucity of a highly trained workforce" and stresses the "need to equip its workforce with employable skills and knowledge."

How are we to interpret a national skill development policy, sold as a judicious response to an urgent and crippling skills shortage, that established clear standards for training and defining skilled workers, yet neglects to specify what those skills are and why they are necessary? We must understand this as a component of predatory development: the continual denial of skill attained through development processes through rhetorical sleight of hand that moves the bar for gainful employment for these educated lower castes.

Behavioral Visions of Skill Development

> "Every year, thousands of engineering graduates pass out of college, but only a tiny

> handful of them are trained in the skills that employers need now. Over 80 percent of them are unemployable for any job in the knowledge economy, said a report by employability assessment company Aspiring Minds."
>
> -- *India Today magazine, March 21, 2019*

Around the same time that Indian state planners came to interpret the skill deficit as a matter of training and credentialing workers without college or vocational degrees, a competing view of the skills deficit took hold among the country's business elites. This alternative understanding was bound up with a growing concern that India's young workforce could not keep up with the blistering pace of economic growth, which averaged 6.1% per year in the early years of the 21st century (Kumar and Subramaniam 2011).

By the 2010s, Indian firms routinely announced projects and investments interrupted by a shortage of skilled workers. The booming biotech industry abandoned advanced R&D for want of skilled scientists, ambitious infrastructure projects stalled due to a shortage of well-trained construction workers, and, despite the international reputation of India's computer engineers, cash-rich tech startups struggled to hire the cutting-edge developers they needed (*Economic Times* 2007; Bellman and Range 2008; Purnell 2015).

An acute shortage of skilled welders in 2015 rippled across the economy, slowing down shipbuilding and pipe fitting alike (Ganguly 2015). Indian corporate executives were soon taking to evening news programs, conference panels, and press statements to declare that the nation's skills shortage was jeopardizing economic growth. "Skill development is going to be the defining element in India's growth story," wrote a Chamber of Commerce member in the *Economic Times* in 2014. "By 2022, we will have 100 million people unable to get jobs due to lack of skills. This is an enormous number and an area that needs a lot of focus," said the chairman of a major Bangalore-based outsourcing firm in 2018 (*Hindu Businessline* 2018).

In practice, however, portrayals of the skills gap that emerged from these discussions seldom referred to the poor, undereducated youth and informal sector workers animating policymakers' concerns. Although business executives often employed the same language, milestones and imagery as Indian government officials when discussing the skills shortage, they drew on distinct underlying definitions of what "skills" meant in practice. More often than not, corporate executives instead located the crisis in the quality of college graduates seeking white collar jobs. Consider the following interpretation of the problem offered by one of the "Get Up, Skill Up" panelists, a young Indian executive at LinkedIn, as he recounted a recent corporate research trip to "go out and observe [Indian college students]...and experience how they lived, how they spend their time in college, and how they got their first job":

> "To me it felt like a 'Swadesh' movie-like moment, where I truly understood the gravity of the problem this country faces. A lot of these college students have spent all of their family's fortunes on getting a college degree, but are now struggling to get a job. And the thing is...India is producing 8 million college graduates every year, and there have been studies that show that more than half of them are unemployable. To me that was an eye opener." (Akshay Kothari, *World Economic Forum* 2016)

Recall that university and post-secondary vocational graduates were the only two groups whom Indian political elites categorically marked as "skilled." For the LinkedIn executive, however, it was precisely the country's expanding crop of college students – especially those located in smaller towns and cities, who are less likely to come from wealth, caste privilege, or English-speaking families (Deshpande and Newman 2007; Subramaniam 2019; Sukumar 2022; Sabharwal et al. 2020) – who became the face of the country's skills crisis after spending "all of their family's fortunes" on higher education only to emerge "unemployable."[31]

[31] The executive later also mentioned Skill India, but as another example of education producing unemployable graduates. He said that "some of the new programs with Skill India, to me that was a step in the right direction...but if you talk to some of the people that got skilled, I think most of them will tell you that they're actually having a tough problem getting a gig, getting an opportunity" (WEF 2016).

Economic elites who participated in the public skills discourse typically framed the problem in terms of the apparent "unemployability" of Indian youth *despite* their advanced education. For them, the real skills shortage had transpired among large numbers of university graduates who, even when equipped with engineering degrees or MBAs, were unfit for employment in the corporate and professional world. In appearances on conference stages and news programs to discuss the "skills gap," corporate executives and human resource professionals routinely inveighed against the apocryphal recent graduate who, hired for his promising qualifications on paper, would utterly fail to demonstrate "real world" skills once in the office. Another illustration comes by way of a 2019 event on "Skilling Up" in India organized by the World Economic Forum. "We know that children are not developing the skills they need to be, you know, the future citizens," one of the panelists, a vice-president of Social Engagement and Responsibility at the toymaker LEGO, suggested. "We focus on the hard skills, on standardized testing. And they grow up and they do not have what we call the 'breadth of skills.' They don't grow up and are critical thinkers, problem solvers, able to communicate and engage" (*WEF* 2019).

This way of understanding the skills deficit trained its sights on the Indian education system itself, and in turn on its expanding crop of college graduates from more rural, vernacular, and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Whereas policymakers understood the "proper training" of formal education as the solution to India's skills shortage (in turn made possible by defining uncredentialed workers as "unskilled" in the first place), economic elites who described the crisis in terms of *employability* saw the education system as central to the problem. During a 2016 primetime news debate titled *Why are India's Graduates Unemployed?*, for example, a human resources executive framed the education system as the source of the skill deficit:

> "What's going on is there is a huge skill deficit which exists. There's an unemployability challenge…There is a problem in the [preparatory] process, which is essentially our

> education system. The National Occupation Code Data is very clear on that. I mean, our education system is actually every year doling out kids. *So 90% of our kids who are coming out have knowledge and zero skills. However, 90% of the jobs out there require skills and zero knowledge.*" (Rituparna Charaborty, HR executive, NDTV 2016)

The executive here elaborates on a "huge skill deficit" by contrasting the "knowledge" possessed by Indian graduates against the "skills" that employers demand. In other words, she equates the skill deficit with the *unemployability* of Indian youth who had already completed their formal education -- in direct contrast with the administrative view of formal education and training as a solution to the problem, rather than the cause. By repeatedly elaborating on "skills" as cultural abilities like etiquette, communication, and critical thinking, on the one hand, and on the "skills deficit" as an *unemployability* problem affecting even advanced degree holders, on the other, elite private sector actors made two implicit claims about the Indian workforce: first, that 'unskilled' workers were identified above all by their lack of *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986), insofar as it rendered them 'unemployable'; and second, that no amount of education, then, could guarantee a worker's employability, because the typical Indian education imparted "knowledge" but not the forms of cultural capital defined as "skills" (elite educations notwithstanding).

The perceived unemployability of graduates disproportionately applies to poor, rural or lower-caste students who lack the embodied cultural capital of their wealthy, urban, upper-caste counterparts. The distinction of "symbolic products...representing excellence in the field of culture" *over and above* the academic training imparted by schools themselves is due, as Bourdieu reminds us, to their monopolization by dominant classes that impart such cultural capital through family upbringing (Bourdieu 1973, 1983).

Indian scholars have repeatedly demonstrated how Dalit and disadvantaged students at higher education institutes not only face discrimination from upper caste peers, professors and school

officials (Kumar 2016; Deshpande 2006), but are also differentiated over supposed cultural competencies like "how to sit, eat, behave...and speak English in their style" (Pathania and Tierney 2018). The practices and status markers of upper caste groups are repurposed as naturalized representations of "merit" and "scientific" temperament of modern Indian citizens (Deshpande 2013; Subramanian 2019; Thomas 2020).

In this way, business elites rhetorically imbued the concepts of "(un)skilled" and the "skills deficit" with new meanings that stood in almost perfect opposition to the definitions advanced by political elites. The distinction is more than mere semantic confusion. As I will show, even when they directly referenced state initiatives like the National Skill Development Policy, Indian employers and corporate executives invoked the skill deficit in ways that not only reveal fundamental contradictions in the larger national narrative, but also render the very concept of "skill" ontologically ambiguous.

First is the matter of who counts as "unskilled" or "unemployable." Whereas Indian government officials conceived of the skills gap in terms of low levels of formal training among low-income and informal sector workers, corporate executives typically located the crisis in the *quality* of job seekers with at least a college degree, and said little about less-educated workers. For them, the real skills shortage had transpired among large numbers of university graduates with engineering degrees and MBAs who, despite their elite education, were unfit for employment in the corporate and professional world.

Next, sharp differences emerged over *which* skills constituted the national shortage: Indian government elites defined relevant skills as certified knowledges meeting certain national and global standards, while business elites more often cited cultural and behavioral traits that mimicked Western norms. Finally, the two groups endorsed conflicting solutions for resolving

the skills deficit. Even as state officials moved ahead with a massive expansion of vocational education and the formalization of informally trained workers, business leaders promoted bespoke digital platforms and applications offering to train job seekers in company-specific skills for a fee.

Yet it is necessary to ask exactly what business elites meant when they spoke of "skills" -- what exactly was lacking among the educated workforce of India? As I will show, they typically did *not* refer to technical competence and ability to work with emerging technologies, even though global private sector interests played an essential role in framing the skills gap as a product of technological revolutions in the workplace. Instead, when pushed to define "skills" in news debates and conference panels, business executives repeatedly spoke of cultural and behavioral qualities such as "creativity" and "etiquette," arguing that Indian workers were essentially technically competent but did not know how to *behave* as good workers. Such understandings characterize the *behavioral logic of skill*, which I explore in the next section.

Defining the Behavioral Logic of Skill

The administrative logic embraced by Indian government officials defined skilled workers as those with formal credentials from training programs legitimized by the state. In contrast, the behavioral logic articulated "employability" and "skill" through cultural standards around self-presentation, communication, and personality traits. Often, Indian employers expressed these behavioral ideals to highlight what even the most qualified workers lacked. For instance, during the same primetime debate cited above, the director of a leading classifieds page offered the following explanation for why, in his estimation, most MBA graduates were unemployable:

> "So here a person goes in, thinking he is, you know, god's gift to mankind, and the company feels that this guy doesn't know ABCD. So *basic communication skills, etiquette, the basic skills of working in an office*...those are things that, some parts could

> be imparted, and some parts is what a person could bring himself up to page...*If in the five years of education you are not getting any experience with the real world, there will obviously be a disconnect*." (Vivek Madhukar, Times Group, NDTV 2016)

In this telling, even the most formally credentialed Indian graduates, such as those who had acquired an advanced business degree, lacked basic "real world" skills like "basic communication" and "etiquette" -- precisely qualities that they could *not* learn in schools. The behavioral logic was premised on the notion that "employable skills" increasingly constituted culturally-specific personality traits that were scarce even among studious Indian students who had successfully passed through the gauntlet of higher education. Surveys of employers listed traits like "flexibility", "interpersonal skills" and "lifelong learning" above technical abilities such as computing and numeracy as "employable skills" they desired (see *Fig. 6*). Business elites routinely cited such "soft skills" as necessary features of worker competency in the "new economy," in direct contrast with "hard skills" like technical knowledge and programming abilities more commonly associated with technological change in the workplace, and which were the traditional focus of vocational education. These norms, moreover, extended to both white collar and low-income jobs, as executives insisted that "even a delivery guy" or retail workers will need to be equipped with soft skills for the jobs of tomorrow:

> "I would say any job, what the employer is looking for his or other capabilities, whether it's to do with a blue collar or what to do with the white collar today, if you look at your retail or even the American financial sector, you know, these are typically the white collar jobs, I guess people are looking for, you know, the skills that *we're looking for which are more creative, more logical reasoning, which are, you know, which make them more job ready*." (Sumit Kumar, HR executive, *NDTV* 2017)

During the 2010s, the value of "soft skills" became a recurring theme in numerous forums and taskforces dedicated to India's skills crisis. At venues such as the World Economic Forum, corporate executives framed subjective behavioral characteristics as a "radical" alternative to

imagining worker competence, in contrast to the rote emphasis on "hard skills" and technical ability that (in their view) characterized the Indian education system. Consider the following comments made by the aforementioned senior manager at LinkedIn at the "Get Up, Skill Up" panel of a 2016 World Economic Forum event held in New Delhi:

> "When we think about skills we think a lot about hard skills. *We don't spend as much time thinking about soft skills*. One of the things I noticed in the field is *you can get someone to program really well*. But the same person when interviewing may not get the job, because he doesn't have the kind of soft skills necessary. So we have to think a lot about what kind of soft skills we are providing, or teaching. One of the more radical ideas...*think about a world in which we can teach our kids empathy and compassion at a very early age*." (Akshay Kothari, LinkedIn exec, WEF 2016)

The executive here again frames India's jobs crisis in terms of the unemployability of its college graduates, citing "studies that show that more than half of them are unemployable." The problem, according to this behavioral logic, is not the insufficient availability of jobs, nor even the technical competence of Indian graduates in modern tasks such as programming. Rather, what young job-seekers lacked was qualities like "empathy and compassion," which ought to be taught in schools but were not. When Indian business elites framed the skills deficit in terms of such "soft skills", they convert personal traits like compassion into forms of symbolic capital. In turn, they enforce cultural distinctions that disproportionately exclude the academic achievements of first generation graduates and members of non-privileged castes, who are less likely to attend elite urban schools where such presentations of the self are cultivated.

Researchers have shown how subjective and cultural standards of ability, such as "fit", are selectively interpreted to prioritize candidates with the most elite pedigrees during hiring (Rivera 2015). In India, even within elite universities such as the Indian Institutes of Technology, upper-middle class Brahmin students strategically deploy cultural ideals of supposedly innate ability and talent to differentiate themselves from non-Brahmin classmates, claiming the latter arrived

through “rote learning” instead of superior talent (Krishna 1985, Subramanian 2019). Lower caste students are routinely derided as “reservation candidates” and systematically denied academic opportunities (Sukumar 2022, Sabharwal et al. 2020, Deshpande and Newman 2007).

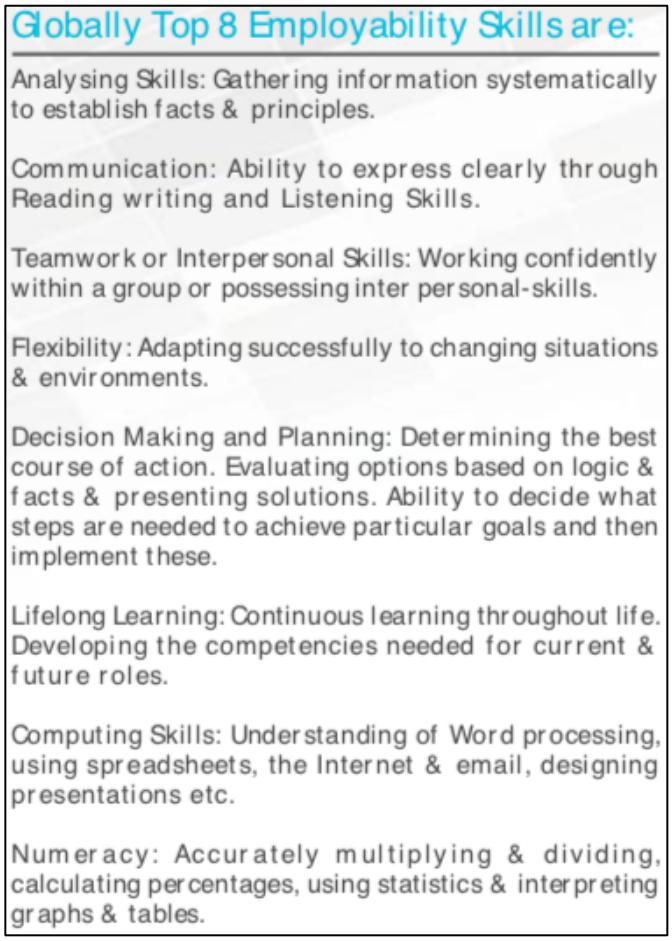


Figure 6: The “Top 8 Employability Skills” listed in the India Skills Report (2020)

These studies demonstrate ways in which cultural and behavioral definitions of ability help reproduce status hierarchies at the level of specific hiring decisions or college admissions procedures, but the behavioral logic goes even further by converting behavioral ideals of skill into knowledge used to sort and classify the national workforce writ large. The LinkedIn executive, for instance, cited one of the several private sector “employability assessments” that

quantified the supposedly employable share of Indian graduates. In the next section, I analyze how these employability assessments legitimate, measure, and instrumentalize contested cultural standards of worth within seemingly scientific, objective representations of India's skill deficit.

Measuring Behavioral Ideas of Skill: Employability Assessments

Behavioral approaches to measuring skill deviate sharply from administrative measures used by the state, as a result obscuring the very thing they measure. As influential components of the national effort to resolve India's skill deficit and stave off demographic disaster, these instruments work to conjure the very problem they're intended to fix by marking ever more workers as "unskilled" and rearticulating a crisis of unemployment as a crisis of *unemployability*.

These distinctions were further codified in the various instruments used to measure and classify skilled/employable workers from those considered unskilled and unemployable. As mentioned above, government officials drew on official statistical measures of formal vocational training. Business elites routinely referred to private sector "employability assessments" instead to quantitatively illustrate the "true" skill gap confronting Indian hiring managers. These assessments, such as the *India Skills Report* and the *Aspiring Minds* survey, administered standardized tests to Indian college students that ostensibly evaluated their "job readiness," the conclusions of which inevitably indicted the state of the Indian higher education system. One such report from 2019, for instance, found that 80% of engineering graduates "are not employable for any job in the knowledge economy," and lamented the need for "fundamental change" in the country's growing numbers of engineering schools:

> "The broad employability numbers remain surprisingly and painfully stubborn! Macro employability and employability trends show no change over the past nine years. Even today, 80% of engineers are not employable for any job in the knowledge economy. This is quite disheartening. It is safe to conclude that the Indian higher education system has

> not been helped by the small ad-hoc changes to which it is accustomed, and is rather in need of fundamental change…The government of India needs to prioritize higher education and undertake long-term policy interventions in the next 5-10 years to ameliorate the low rate of engineering employability." (Aspiring Minds 2019)

The results of such employability assessments routinely find their way into newspaper headlines, Parliamentary debates and World Economic Forum panels as facts about the grim skill shortages characterizing the Indian workforce. Yet the annual "skills gap" studies conducted for *India Skills Report* and *Aspiring Minds Survey* almost exclusively focus on quantifying the "employable" share of Indian university students for various white collar professions. The annual reports of these "employability assessments" – which in both cases are designed, conducted and produced by Indian human resource firms – promise readers sober, scientific analyses of Indian labor markets as well as concrete recommendations for improving the 'employability' of Indian workers.

Since 2014 and 2010 respectively, both *India Skills Report* and the *Aspiring Minds Survey* have consistently concluded that vast sections of Indian graduates are unemployable for modern workplaces, and serve as standard references in corporate discourse on India's skills deficit. Earlier reports concluded that half of all B.A.-degree holders weren't "employable in *any* role/sector in the knowledge economy," with employability rates for certain roles, such as analysts and accountants, falling to less than 3% (Aspiring Minds 2010, 2013).

> "Employability skills are general skills that are required to secure most of the jobs. These help you to stay in a job and work your way up to the top. While there will always be some job-specific skills that an employer is looking for, most employers will also want you to have some general skills. *Employability Skills are also the skills and attitudes that enable employees to get along with their colleagues, make critical decisions, solve problems, develop respect and ultimately become strong ambassadors for the organization.* Employability Skills are the foundation of a successful career." (Wheebox Employability Skills Test Sample Report *n.d.*)

The stated aim of both the *India Skill Report* and the *Aspiring Minds* survey is to call attention to India's skill deficit and assist policymakers and employers in preparing the workforce for the new economy. To measure the share of the Indian workforce "fit" for formal sector employment, both assessments routinely administer standardized "skills" tests to thousands of Indian college students nationwide (Table 2). Both *ISR* and *Aspiring Minds* are conducted by private human resource consultancies in collaboration with industry bodies like the Confederation of Indian Industry. They do differ in their exact methodologies and resulting estimates, the *India Skill Report* concluding in 2014 for instance that "across domains, only 33.95% [of candidates] were found employable. This means about 2/3 of our skill pool is not fit to have a job" (*ISR* 2014), while *Aspiring Minds* reported in the year prior that 47% of graduating college seniors were employable (Aspiring Minds 2013).

Nonetheless, both assessments have consistently fueled and substantiated the idea that the overwhelming majority of India's graduates were unemployable, and that it was cause for national alarm. Because their conclusions on the "skill levels" and "employability" of India's "talent pool" are so often grim, the annual reports nearly always provide an occasion for sensationalist media reports over the sorry state of India's skilled workforce. ("Over 80 percent of [engineering graduates] are unemployable for any job in the knowledge economy," lamented a 2019 *India Today* story, citing that year's *Aspiring Minds* survey.)

Employability Assessment	*Wheebox Employability Skills Test (WEST)*	*Aspiring Minds Computer Adaptive Test (AMCAT)*
Years active	2014 - present	2010 - present
"Hard skills" tested	Numerical reasoning, Computer aptitude	Quantitative Aptitude, Computer Fundamentals, Subject-specific Abilities
"Soft skills" tested	Logical Reasoning, English Language, Self-Determination, Learning Agility, Interpersonal Skills, Emotional Intelligence, Adaptability, Conflict Resolution	Logical Ability, English, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, Openness to Experience

Table 5: Comparing "Hard" and "Soft" Skills evaluated by WEST and AMCAT

Crucially, both studies instrumentalized behavioral ways of seeing skill as objectified, scientific knowledge. At the heart of these studies are the tests used to measure individuals' abilities, called the Wheebox Employment Skills Test (WEST) in the case of *ISR* and the Aspiring Minds Computer Adaptive Test (AMCAT) used by *Aspiring Minds* (Table 5). These tests are digitally administered to graduating university students in thousands of campuses across India, as well as to individual candidates for a fee. *ISR* and *Aspiring Minds* portray their tests as scientific, objective measures trusted by employers. The inaugural edition of *ISR* in 2014 repeatedly signalled that its Wheebox Employability Skills Test (WEST) represented a scientifically accurate assessment of the "current skill levels of the country":

> "WEST, an employability skill assessment test launched on Wheebox.com in 28 States and 1800 Educational Campuses across India captures the current skill levels of the country. About 100,000 students spread across these campuses were assessed on 260 domain areas and skill gaps *that are scientific in nature were validated using reliable talent assessment tools*. The result was an overall picture depicting how the students rank in terms of skills that would be imperative to judge the employability." (*ISR* 2014)

The legitimacy of WEST and AMCAT derives from the perception that the test questions

themselves are objective measures of "employability," which their operators take great pains to assure readers are scientifically-verified. Elaborating the sample size and methodology of a given study is, of course, routine scientific practice. The *Aspiring Minds* group published a 2014 whitepaper, for instance, presented evidence that the AMCAT could reliably replace interviews as a means for vetting candidates, as well as a separate paper that described the process of designing the AMCAT as follows:

> "While designing the AMCAT module for these graduates, our instrument design team developed a competency framework to incorporate majority of the crucial domain and non-specialized skills required from graduates for entry-level jobs. Based on this competency framework, items (questions) for the test were designed. Special care was taken to ensure that items had good psychometric properties. The competency allocation for each item was verified through a consensus by experts. After expert review on various parameters, the items were sampled on actual graduate test-takers. Items with irrelevant statistical properties were weeded out and item response models for the test were developed. These were then delivered adaptively using Aspiring Minds' proprietary item selection and delivery algorithm. The final assessment test showed reliability comparable to global standards." (Aspiring Minds 2013)

But claims that WEST and AMCAT exams provide scientifically accurate assessments of the "current skill levels of the country" (*ISR* 2014) are belied by the majority of Indian youth *not* represented in these assessments. As Bourdieu and Passeron remind us, the meritocratic haze of standardized testing helps reproduce existing inequalities by "concealing social selection under the guise of technical selection and legitimating the reproduction of social hierarchies by transmuting them into academic hierarchies" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970). In particular, they identify the *probabilities of candidature* as even more consequential factor than the *probabilities of passing* usually associated with the gatekeeping function of exams.

WEST and AMCAT are administered almost exclusively to English-speaking university students; the much larger share of Indian youth who do not complete higher education have virtually zero *probabilities of candidature*. This is despite the fact that the *India Skill Report*

devotes an entire section to outcomes under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana which, as discussed, targeted low-income dropouts, not middle-class engineering graduates. This means that one of the primary targets of government skill development efforts – non-college educated youth – have no representation in the accounts of *India Skill Report* or *Aspiring Minds*, even as they claim to "bring in a more realistic, holistic view of [the] skill and talent landscape in India" (ISR 2014). The structural exclusion of these assessments is further reflected by the fact that the historically unorganized sectors comprising the *largest* share of NPSDE programs, like construction and beauty, are least represented by employability assessments.

The specific content of the exams themselves, moreover, encodes exclusive behavioral ideals of employability skills likely to place rural, lower caste and first generation students at a structural disadvantage. Students are tested not only on the "hard skills" they can expect to learn through degree and diploma courses, but equally on less tangible qualities like personality, communication, and personal comportment emphasized by the behavioral logic of skill. A closer reading of the annual reports reveals that more than poor "domain knowledge" -- although that too is a major point of contention -- what accounted for the high failure rate was candidates' performances on less technical aspects of the exam, such as "communication skills," "logical ability" and English command. Consider this passage from the 2013 *Aspiring Minds Survey* explaining why only 3% of graduates were found to be employable as business analysts:

> **Analyst**: Employability of graduates is found to be exceptionally low (3.03%) in the Analyst role. A role in analytics demands strong numerical and data analysis skills. The candidate should be able to analyze a new problem, question assumptions, deduce meaning and also be able to generalize from specific information. Along with this, they require well-developed written English communication skills. The study found that graduates mostly lack the skills required for this role. Around 84% graduates do not exhibit the required competence in cognitive ability, whereas 90% lack the required competence when it comes to English communication ability – both skills considered crucial for this role. The overlapped criteria pulled the figures of employable graduates to as low as 3%. (*Aspiring Minds* 2013)

English communication is one thing, but what, exactly, proves competence in cognitive ability? Surely the Telugu-speaking child of a tribal field worker who successfully graduates college does not overcome her unlikely odds without analyzing more than a few new problems, or questioning more than a few long-held assumptions, or learning to constantly deduce meaning from an unfamiliar world. Surely her immense effort and sacrifice speak to competence; surely her mastery over the very forms of study long monopolized by the "educated castes" demonstrate her intellectual ability. Surely she may claim to have demonstrated qualities like "self-determination," "adaptability" and "emotional intelligence" throughout her own life – as I have sought to highlight through the examples of many of my Araku respondents.

Yet this later batch of "Behavioral Qualities" is precisely what the Wheebox and WEST exams claim to so scientifically measure – and yet most likely to doom first-generation kids not belonging to upper castes to categorization as "unemployable." The Wheebox exam, for instance, uses psychometric evaluations of "self-determination" and other qualities with equal weight in its assessments (Figure 7):

> "Your score suggest [*sic*] that you are not very high on self-determination nor you are very low. You lie in the medium range which means that you demonstrate the ability to make an effective decision, doing so you also consider other people's opinion. You do not like to make any decision by yourself, you feel that its [*sic*] always good to take other people's thought in consideration so that if something goes wrong then you are not the only one responsible for it. You do not trust your skills and knowledge on every occasion so you do not expect a high performance every time you are doing a certain work. While working on something you seek constant approvals from others. For eg. In an organizational setting you are more likely to delegate the work which has been given to you, so that you can blame other [*sic*] if something goes wrong." (*WEST Sample Report*)

And as Figure 7 shows, behavioral qualities like 'self-determination,' 'learning ability,' 'interpersonal abilities,' 'emotional intelligence,' 'adaptability' and 'conflict resolution' are measured with equal weighting as more concrete evaluations of logical and numerical reasoning:

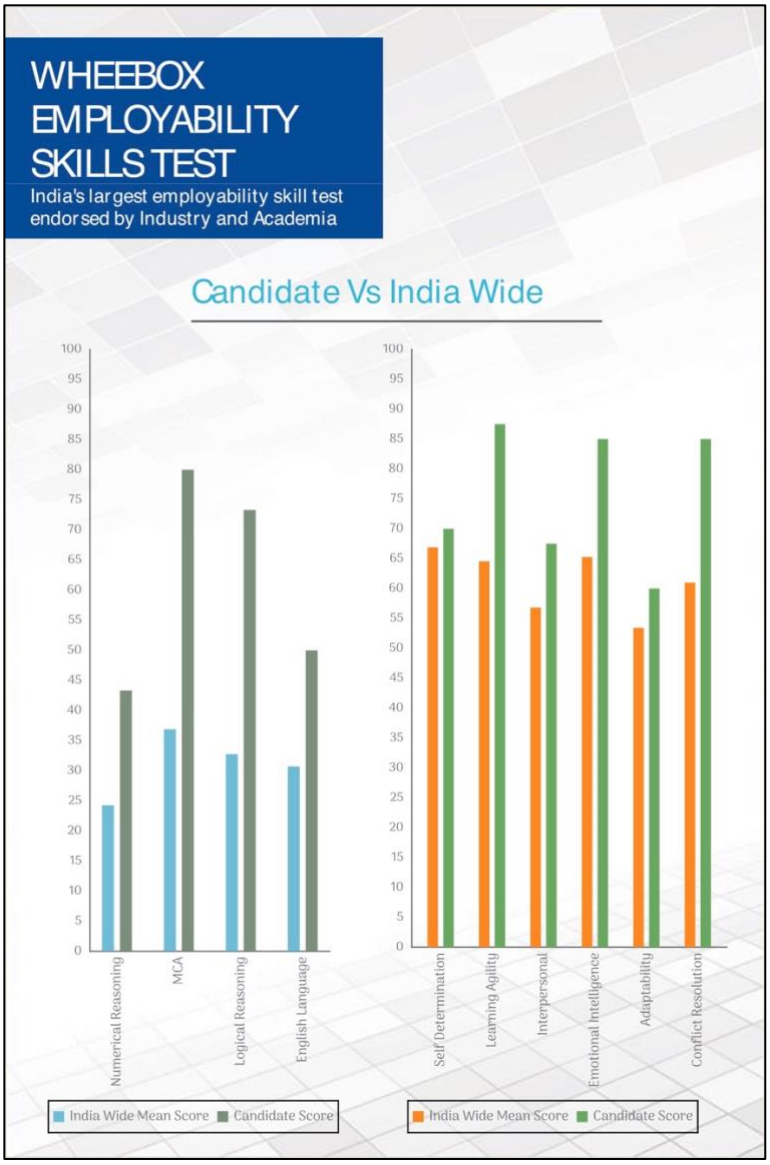


Figure 7: Sample Cognitive and Behavioral WEST Test Results (Source: Wheebox website)

While the India wide results show better performances in these behavioral spheres than the cognitive sections, and such behavioral qualities are no doubt necessary in modern employment – the *India Skills Report* explains that behavioral qualities scoring below 70% are counted negatively against overall employability scores. This means that the entire India-wide conclusion of unemployability among its graduates is largely driven not only by their performance on criteria which they can be said to have been taught in school, even if in a different language, but

by *an entirely different set of culturally-specific, psychometric evaluations with a rather arbitrary score cutoff*.

Inexplicably, however, this feature of both the India Skills Report and the Aspiring Minds employability report is neither problematized nor even interrogated as their conclusions are adopted wholesale into the national conversation, whether on the floors of Parliament or in conferences featuring top scholars from Princeton and Harvard Universities. The specific questions in the psychometric tests offer a good illustration of how supposedly scientific measures can become discriminatory in practice. From a *WEST* sample exam:

Q1. Select the option with which you agree the most.
1. I get a lot of invitations from friends.
2. I have an open mind towards what other people might say.

Q2. Select the option with which you agree the most.
1. I smile at everyone I see.
2. I always ask for a bill (cash memo) when I buy stuff.

Q3. Select the option with which you agree the most.
1. I often regret my decisions.
2. Doing multiple things at one time can be fun.

Q4. Select the option with which you agree the most.
1. I make a schedule to study for my exams.
2. I am uncomfortable interacting with the opposite sex.

Q5. Select the option with which you agree the most.
1. I like to decorate my room.
2. I am very polite and respectful to everyone I meet.

In the above questions, the "right" choice is #2 in the first three questions, and #1 in the last two. But how exactly will these cultural competencies be clear, or even valuable, to rural students without the benefit of a Westernized childhood – who do not have their own rooms to decorate, who are raised to be polite and value belonging in a large social network? What these

exams measure is not personality or soft skills, but rather cultural affinity and 'fit' with the worldviews of India's westernized, upper-caste elite.

Discussion

Remembering the "Muggers"

As unemployment steadily rose in India following the global financial crisis, there was no shortage of street protests and labor movements demanding the government create more opportunities for the country's record numbers of unemployed youth. This demand was voiced most keenly by first generation students and graduates from caste- and class-disadvantaged families, who were successfully completing high school and degree programs in huge numbers but discovered good career opportunities were slim to none on the other side. "I want my education to be of some use," Earappa Bagwe, an unemployed B.Tech graduate from a tribal community told the news website *PARI*. "I am an engineer and want to work in a place where my degree has some value" (Naseer 2020).

In this chapter, I demonstrate the work of a 'caste alliance,' to borrow a term from Evans (1979), between state and multinational interests generating a moral panic about the beneficiaries of India's first universal program of education. The overwhelming message is that the quality of Indian education has gone so hopelessly awry that its graduates can be at best retrained for low-end work like service labor – presumably a change that has happened only after the speakers themselves graduated. It makes this argument by claiming to have all manners of rigorous data on employability and skill. But right away from deep logical fissures surface between the private and public sectors bringing this problem up and who claim to be united on the skill development agenda. But while the public sector elites saw the crisis among high school grads or below, and something to be resolved through new systems of credentialing – what I call the *administrative*

logic of skilling – the private sector elites saw it among the behavioral features of college and MBA graduates – what I termed the *behavioral* logic of skilling.

The introduction defined predatory development as an elite-led project to further incorporate the masses into processes of capitalism, while neutralizing the threat this incorporation may pose to the caste hegemony of Indian elites. Specifically, incorporation of the masses as a productive resource for 21st century transnational capitalism necessitates their educational inclusion in terms of higher human capital – a process of constant "upgrading" of people's skills, economic productivity, and the attractiveness of national brand value to global markets (ILO 2004, World Bank 2018, McKinsey 2018). This is a delicate balance to pursue because on the one hand, education holds a special place in the story of post-colonial elites in democratic India, while giving marginalized groups a legitimate claim to the professional opportunities and forms of developmental citizenships monopolized by upper-caste elites.

India prides itself on the export of its human talent. Upper caste Indian elites of past generations could cohere across class and language as modern developmental citizens who embodied the virtues of a secular nationalism and post-colonial democracy. They shared in a strong identification with "middle class" virtues and work ethics, and in being quintessentially "Indian," all of it further reinforces through engagement in public education and employment. These feelings constituted for them, in turn, the legitimacy of their developmental citizenship and its attendant benefits. They could achieve all this in a desperately poor country without contradicting their liberal Nehruvian ideals, because their privileged positions of public employment and complete inclusion into the formal sector economy (state banking, home ownership, pension funds etc.) remained theoretically open to their countrymen, the vast majority of whom remained too poor and marginalized to mount any serious challenge to upper

caste hegemony.

Down through my parents' generation coming of age in the 1970s, and even afterwards, upper caste elites would study in government schools taught in regional languages – and plagued with even worse problems of poor infrastructure and teacher absenteeism liable for the poor state of Indian public education today. Even the public universities they studied in, like Osmania University of Hyderabad and Andhra University of Visakhapatnam, were widely seen as universities that did not properly teach their graduates. But this was not held against the upper caste of days yore. Instead, Indian science and engineering graduates of past generations fueled a wave of high-skilled migration and immense optimism of the "global India" (Irani 2020). The upper caste engineers and programmers who moved to the States, like my parents, often hailed from small towns and spoke only haltering English themselves. Often they did not attend the most elite universities in either India nor the United States. Nevertheless, they were celebrated for their supposedly innate ability to learn on the fly, which they indeed demonstrated in places like the United States, where they soon established themselves as "model minorities."

I highlight those last few details to illustrate how similar conditions of poor instruction and minimal English education feed into popular narratives about the talents of a non-marginalized section of Indian society: the urban upper castes. Hyderabad's Osmania University in the 1980s, for instance, became legendary for its culture of "muggers," or young hustlers finding creative and sometimes less-than-legitimate ways to fulfill their global ambitions in spite of the lack of quality education at their universities. The quintessential mugger was a young male engineering student raised by middle class, upper caste, government job-holding parents. Their tactics included leaking GRE papers in advance, or forging bank records and ancestral land titles to prove to American authorities that they held sufficient capital to obtain student and work visas to

the United States. “At some point, the U.S. must have let in a batch of muggers whose families held more land than all of India combined,” joked an uncle of mine who studied at Osmania himself in the 1980s. It was these earlier graduates who went onto become the most successful generation of the Indian diaspora, rising to the top of major financial, technology and consulting firms, becoming the “global Indians” proudly embraced at home and seen in the U.S. as an exceptionally intelligent, skilled population of migrants.

I do not seek to refute these positive claims, as well as the ample evidence of this group’s ability to learn while doing. Rather, I am attempting to show that among the Indian mainstream, as recently as the 1990s, poor education quality and unfamiliarity in English were not disqualifiers. Instead, they were seen as challenges for Indian graduates of the time to overcome, and the basis for a postcolonial nation to root for fellow citizens who could find creative ways to make it overseas, succeeding even in the corporate environments of the West. That spirit of generosity, belief in creativity and adaptability taken for granted among India’s ‘educated people’ back then could not be further from the language employed in depiction of the contemporary skills crisis. In this case, poor education and the supposed lack of “soft skills” are grounds for attaining the extreme opposite conclusion.

What changed? Certainly not the quality of Indian schools. Rather, the primary difference is in the **caste composition of Indian graduates**. This is why the skills crisis is a case of predatory development, of perverse justifications that conclude people are worse off than they would have been in the past, based on new conditional languages and new forms of testing abilities. Just as large numbers of Adivasi, Dalit and other disadvantaged caste children went to school and overcame the historic barrier of education, powerful state and corporate policy actors work to steer them back into low wage, informal sector jobs by systematically devaluing their

achievements and credentials. Long idealized as a mechanism allowing people to escape poverty in a poor country, the education system itself was trashed by these policy actors just as India's universities began to churn out graduates better representative of the whole country. In the following two chapters, I return to Araku Valley – first in 2017 and then again in 2023 – to witness how my young respondents gradually came to realize they were locked in a system of predatory development, and how they resisted against it.

Chapter 5
We Swagger

> "To be part of the nation, it was not sufficient for tribes to join the economic and political system; rather, this new nationalism required them to assimilate into the sociocultural system of larger India as well. Greater India had come to perceive tribes as primitive, uncivilized, lazy, and hedonistic. Tribes were thus expected to shed those characteristics under a civilizing mission…to learn an alien language, history, culture, and tradition, and to identify with them."
>
> *– Virginius Xaxa (2016)*

Introduction

Ramesh was an anomaly of sorts, because he was an auto rickshaw driver who had a salary-paying job. Simply having a job was enough to be an anomaly in Araku Valley, where the government barely keeps track of whether babies survive their first year, let alone whether young people find work. But the fact that Ramesh saunters over to the Kinchumanda rickshaw stand after finishing his shift at the post office, a central government job that could be passed on for generations like an heirloom? And that he openly identifies as a rickshaw driver, when he could have just collected his paycheck and reupholstered his life with middle class sensibility? *That* was not the behavior of decent, working people.

"When I'm at work I play that role," he told me one afternoon in January 2017. "But when I'm here I'm one of the boys."[32]

At the rickshaw stand, Ramesh was in his element. The slender 29-year-old popped his collar and slipped a Bluetooth receiver over his ear, corralling the other drivers with the combination of fraternal banter and streetwise competence that he had mastered. I met Ramesh in 2015 while

[32] These interactions all took place in Telugu, the state language of Andhra Pradesh, and the one I had most in common with my multilingual respondents across Araku Valley. I have tried to translate dialogue as faithfully to the original meaning and symbolism as possible. English words are often sprinkled throughout conversation, and I note whenever they are analytically significant.

reporting a magazine story on the emergent hip-hop culture among *Dalit* and tribal youth in some of India's farthest-flung villages. They called him the Dance Master because he had, for over a decade, trained the *Valmiki*[33] kids in his village in the arts of street dance and swagger. Ramesh first picked up dancing during a long spell of migrant work in the city, where he found casual employment as a dockworker. He was such a natural talent, he says, that he soon found himself part of a working-class dance troupe that entertained weddings and community festivals with elaborately conceived performances.

Some dancers hold out hope for a genuine opportunity, drawing on a narrative of karmic justice largely encultured through the film industry itself. Once work at the docks dried up, however, Ramesh returned to the Valley instead. *All no worries*, he said to me in English, when I asked how it felt to move home after years in the city. Ramesh spoke in slow, non-committal sentences, drawling out the words as though he was constantly wrestling with ideas too profound for concrete expression. It was a quality that served to bring constant attention to his cool.

Ramesh maneuvered into the back of his auto-rickshaw, reclining back onto the linoleum seat and kicking his feet up over the cross bar. The gaggle of younger drivers who always followed him — perpetually hooded, the delicate fuzz of adolescent beards across their jaws — snickered at this characteristic irreverence.

"Look at this guy, out here acting like a hero," he teased Ravi, a teenager who dealt with the emotional pressures of his wife's pregnancy by proposing melodramatically to every attractive

[33] The Scheduled Tribe to which Ramesh and most people in his village belong. Some states classify Valmikis a Scheduled Caste (i.e. Dalit) due to their relative, if slim, advantages over other tribal groups. In Araku Valley, though, younger respondents tended to employ the English terms *STs* or *tribes*; older respondents typically chose the Telugu term *girjan*, meaning hill people, or *Agency vaalu*.

female customer that came his way. “Go home. Your wife is looking for you.”

Perpetually Poor, Perpetually Youth

In both Western societies and the Global South, the changing nature of work has disrupted traditional transitions to adulthood while reconfiguring gender relations and pushing young adults towards novel forms of identity construction (Silva 2013, Silberschmidt 2001, Cole 2005, Mojola 2014). As countless studies have shown, the expansion of schooling and work training in developing countries may have had dramatic consequences for how young adults form identities and make sense of their world, but unfortunately, the world tends to return them far less in terms of genuine opportunities for social and occupational mobility (Owen-Eisemon and Schwille 1991; Frye 2012; Morrow 2013).

A growing literature on how young people navigate contemporary social and economic uncertainties combines tensions of class and arrested mobility with disruptions fueled by the global economy (Silva 2013; Poonam 2018; Cole and Durham 2008; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Ethnographers have examined, in particular, affective and subjective dimensions of the lives of unemployed youth (e.g., Cole 2005; Mains 2007; Weiss 2009). Jennifer Cole’s analysis of the “perpetually poor, perpetually youth” of Madagascar situates adolescence in the “new kinds of people” emerging from the “confrontation between local, established categories of personhood and the new contexts produced by social and economic globalization” (Cole 2005).

Recent studies of educated, unemployed young men in the developing world highlight the anxieties of “waithood” (Fernandes 2004, Heuzé 1996; Chakrabarty 2000; Honwana 2014; Mains 2007), or a pervasive sense of being “marooned by modernity” as in Cindi Katz’s (2004) account of Sudanese youth. A large literature on educated and unemployed young men in India

devotes particular attention to class dynamics between the poor and lower middle classes, finding either emergent political coalitions against the rich (Chatterjee 2004) or entrepreneurial new forms of exploitation (Hansen 1996). Craig Jeffrey's remarkable study of unemployed students in Uttar Pradesh colleges finds unlikely alliances between Jat, Dalit and Muslim students condemned to "suffer timepass" together while waiting for work.

These studies all express themes enormously resonant with my own. They demonstrate how all around the world, for nearly half a century at least, marginalized youth aspiring to social mobility through education were relentlessly met with failures to launch careers that never materialized, and shared in experiences of eternal liminality that in turn reshaped social identities and class relations. My study departs from the scholarship on youth and unemployment, however, with its analytical focus on predatory development.

Here, I conceptualize educated young men and women's aspirations as embedded within the arrangements of economic development as a national and political project. I argue that the physical setting of the rickshaw stand became the site for making symbolic, territorial claims amid the disruptions caused by predatory development to the Valley's traditions of adulthood transition and gender relations. As I show below, young tribal men turn to informal work in the transportation sector when a traditional agricultural livelihood becomes unfeasible and structural discrimination makes status attainment through formal employment all but impossible. The low status of rickshaw drivers, however, is mediated by their visibility in the marketplace and the crucial role their service plays in economic life.

Predatory development, I argue, flips the script on longstanding associations between academic success, youth delinquency and class formation. Paul Willis' classic study of school boys in England (1977), for instance, demonstrated how working class youths' rebellions against

the disciplinary mechanisms of their school simultaneously represented a critique of class-based philosophies while cementing their own future as laborers. In the United States, Jay McLeod argued in his *Ain't No Making It* (1987) that poor black youth found meaning in the same aspirational promises of schooling that their poor white peers rejected entirely. The difference, McLeaod argued, was that the black 'Brothers' could attribute their own parents' failings to pre-Civil Rights era discrimination, whereas the white 'Hallway Hangers' could not.

In this chapter, I explore how the emerging contradictions in shared understandings about the developing world get worked out when the cultural models around which people have built their lives turn out to be hollow. If education doesn't actually lead to the sort of good, formal sector jobs one associated with "real development," what does that entail for the project of real development itself? Should people reject the whole enterprise? Or do they find parts of it that can be salvaged? Using the interactions of two groups of young men in Araku – the "Motorfield Boys" and the "job seekers," I show that conflicts over how we *ought* to develop force people to articulate shared values around what development means and how it ultimately liberates people.

The Motorfield Boys

Performative Masculinities against Predatory Development

I first met the Kinchumanda auto drivers in 2014, while researching indigenous life in Araku Valley, part of a 35,6000 sq. mile stretch of India's eastern hills that the government had designated as reserved tribal land. Like an asphalt artery, Araku Valley's main highway runs 27 dusty miles between its two major towns, before winding down on either end toward eastern India's coastal plains. From about half a dozen small marketplaces along the way – little ganglions of mom-and-pop stores, dusty government buildings, the occasional ATM – auto

rickshaw stands provide taxi services along dirt lanes that fan out endlessly into the rugged hills, providing a tenuous but crucial connection for hundreds of isolated tribal communities that dot a patchwork of brown fields and balding forests.

The roughly 70 or so young rickshaw drivers working the Kinchumanda stand, nearly all of them younger than thirty, took turns running a looping route between the main road and the "Interior Place," charging each passenger a fixed rate that was set by the Kinchumanda auto drivers' union. Each morning they lined up on a first-come-first-serve basis, taking turns to fill their rickshaw with 10 to 15 passengers before heading out. After fuel and maintenance costs, a single run will net a driver about 400 rupees (roughly $6) – effectively a day's wage, since drivers rarely receive more than one turn per day.



Fig. 1: Ramesh (center) and his "Dance Masters" crew in 2016 (photo courtesy: GQ India).

"We all went to school," one driver told me when I asked a group of waiting drivers about career ambitions. "At least until the 10th grade, but a lot of us are [college] graduates. No one could find a job."

Ramesh, ever the social scientist, offered a more detailed breakdown. “I would say that, maybe, 50 percent of these fuckers just do it for the girls. Twenty-five percent do it because they genuinely need the work. And the rest just like to roam the streets, and this is how you can do that and still seem legit.”

“But pretty much all of our parents think we’re useless,” added Ravi. “So you can go home at the end of the evening, throw a hundred rupees in your father’s face and say –“

“Look, I earned something today, asshole.” Ramesh finished his statement, prompting a chorus of laughter from the young men nearby.

On an earlier date, during the Sankranti harvest festival in January, I watched Ramesh and several other rickshaw drivers, as well as a number of their girlfriends, put on a break dance performance in a nearby village, strutting, shaking, and popping on a concrete stage – as if to subvert, through dance, the idea that tribal villages are too destitute to ever be cool (Nemana 2016). The Kinchumanda drivers, especially, liked to engage in long bouts of myth-making about themselves.

“Motor field guys will try their hand at anything,” declared Ravi, the teenager who owed Ramesh money. “Volleyball, dance, mechanics. Doesn’t matter if they don’t know shit. Motor field boys do it anyway.” A mischievous grin spread across his face. “You know none of us knew how to drive when we started? You just borrow your boy’s auto and figure it out.”

Decent People

More than a source of income, though, membership in a motor field “gang” was a badge that could be worn around the Valley. It meant that you at least belonged to a crew that had your

back. And like a team, the young members of each rickshaw stand in the Valley maintained solidarity beyond the realm of work, grouping together at local festivals and in competitive sports teams and dance troupes.

Those who relied on this protected circle as customers, however, loved to complain about the toxic behaviors and juvenile bravado of rickshaw drivers. Nearly everyone in Araku Valley referred to the work of rickshaw drivers as the "motor field," which was both an English loan to the local lexicon, and a nod to India's apparent problem of idle young men. Motor field types dominated Kinchumanda's small marketplace, ambling down the road with arms draped around each other. Not just that, older villagers and younger jobholders often complained, but they also gambled and drank to oblivion. They watched porn on their cell phones – right on the street! – and smuggled cannabis and made moves on your teenage daughter as they dropped her off at school. Even mainstream Indian film and advertising tended to depict rickshaw drivers as perpetually out of place, for instance beeping their way through a dignified procession, or inappropriately falling in love with a wealthy woman.

The motor field, a tribal engineering student named Ashok explained, was much too *mass*. As in a mob, a horde, or a swarm, in a country that was already teeming with people. "I have friends in the motor field," he said. "They wear garish clothes, and they tend to talk with a kind of slang. They don't speak properly. It's…it's not how we should behave if we want to develop."

Most of all, he added, Araku Valley's rickshaw drivers neither tended to their family farms, out of deference to tradition and filial piety, nor successfully landed a permanent job, the only reliable ticket out of poverty in Indian tribal life. This last stereotype, at least, was true.

Landing a permanent job – a real job, which gave benefits, cut taxes, and reasonably promised to still exist when you showed up for work the next day – was a tribal family's only

real ticket out of poverty. Everybody knew that. Growing up in the Valley you saw, as sure as the hills were balding of their forests and the soil diminishing its yield, that the job holders in your village were growing fat on rich diets.

You saw that although the Valley's teachers, policemen, and ITDA[34] staff now hailed from Scheduled Tribes[35], they physically resembled the upper-caste officials who preceded them: big-bellied men who wore aviator sunglasses and collared shirts tucked into their jeans, women in chiffon saris and gold earrings who plaited their hair, leaving behind faint clouds of talcum powder as they sped past on their motorcycles. They built new houses with running water as the common streams dried up, and educated their children alongside upper-caste classmates in the city instead of the severely underfunded, tribal-only government schools in the Valley. You saw that people in this Bourdieusian middle class acted as cultural ambassadors of the Indian state, and liked to call themselves "*decent people*."

Being decent meant avoiding beef, or alcohol of any kind, which took the fun out of the meat and liquor-heavy feasts of tribal celebrations. Decent people also avoided those festivals' raunchy public dances that extended late into the night, instead watching cricket and celebrating the Christian and Hindu holidays for entertainment. According to my field interviews, it was the taken-for-granted view that if a young tribal man or woman wanted to join the middle class, they had better start acting decent.

[34] The Integrated Tribal Development Agency, the government body responsible for administration in Visakhapatnam Agency, the tribal reservation of which Araku Valley is a part.
[35] Also known as *adivasis* or Scheduled Tribes (STs), as the Indian government officially designates the 104 million historically disadvantaged indigenous people in the country.

The Job Seekers

Educational Inclusion as Predatory Development

There was, however, one major problem with the 'decent people' attitude: the context of predatory development spun its internal logic on its head. Problematic as their behavior could be, rickshaw drivers nonetheless provided a genuine and necessary community service that enabled people from underserved interior villages to access markets, schools, hospitals and other necessities. They protected their market power by purchasing their own rickshaws, preferring to find clever ways to finance them to relying on rented machines. The Kinchumanda drivers also organized themselves into a union that implemented a turn-based system and standard fares, thereby eliminating the need for acrimonious competition. Most of all, almost all of them managed to earn a regular income and provide for their families. In this way, it was the bad apple rickshaw drivers who embodied the spirit of "real development."

Meanwhile, it was the hardworking, scholastically-minded job seekers who struggled hardest to live up to their plans and aspirations. Recall the conference on Girijan youth that I described in the Introduction and Chapter 1. There, an Adivasi youth activist named Surendra saw in state-sponsored 'tribal development' initiatives an insidious structural disregard of tribal talents and capabilities. "Right now in the Agency[36] there are some 15,000 intermediate graduates, 25,000 secondary school certificate holders, 3,000 B.Eds and 3,300 D.IE.Eds [teaching diplomas], not to mention hundreds of college graduates. All of them are unemployed," he said.

"Chandrababu promised jobs to youth, but even empty government positions are not being

[36] The "Agency" refers to the Visakhapatnam Scheduled Agency, a 6,293 square kilometer sub-division of Andhra Pradesh's Visakhapatnam district that contains Araku Valley where this study is based. Its rural highlands are constitutionally demarcated as scheduled tribal land, home to some 650,000 people mainly from Scheduled Tribes.

filled. The 3500 villages in the Agency only have 2000 primary schools among them. Why aren't they setting up the other 1500 schools as per the Right to Education Act, and at least hiring girijan teachers to staff them? Instead he wants to close down thousands of schools with less than 20 students each, which will hurt tribal children and tribal teachers."

Even setting public employment aside, Surendra argued, tribal people were also systematically excluded from entrepreneurial profits through the development of tribal lands, such as government contracts for mining and tourism ventures. These potential opportunities for *girijans* to share in rapid economic growth became, perversely, further occasions for their socio-economic marginalization.

"The chief minister adopted a 'model village' to showcase the Agency's development potential. It ended up resulting in the demolishment of the local school but little else. What model is this? His idea of tribal development is to build huge cricket stadiums or 7 star hotels on hundreds of acres of Agency land – will any of us stay there? Ever? Will we ever play cricket in that stadium, or even go see a match? These projects may bring lots of outside people in, but none of them are for tribal people at all."

"Don't you see?" asked Murthy. "The whole point is to ruin *girijans* by not actually educating them. To teach them to read just enough to work as drivers, servants and guards for the rich. Our people are going over to the plains just to stand by the gate and *salaam*, just to wait on rich people in hotels we could never afford. Overall, education is useless for us the way things stand right now."

Murthy's perspective has gradually become the awakening perspective across the Agency – a broadening sense that notions of decency and middle class respectability only serve middle class and upper caste regimes, without offering genuine upward mobility for Agency youth. In the

actions of the rickshaw drivers one saw, there was more freedom and even usefulness to the local community by rejecting the strictures of decency. Many Araku youth, especially men, rejected moral narratives they were fed – study hard, get a government job, don't drink, "be decent" – upon realizing they did little to liberate their lives, and might even have helped to diminish them. At the same time, the job seekers of Araku were unwilling to turn on their dreams outright. The associations of education in real development were deep and powerful – but the lack of true opportunities made stark the question of whom and what real development is meant to serve.

A Strange Divide

Where the rickshaw drivers like to imitate the movies, living out a notion of masculinity rooted in youth and numerical presence, the job seekers looked up to government officials, police officers, headmasters, older men whose confidence and virility arrives from their position and wealth. As Ravi, a teenager who was studying to become a cop, explained, "The [circle inspector] goes everywhere with a group of constables at his back. If anyone fucks with him, or even looks at him the wrong way, his constables teach him a lesson. He doesn't even have to lift a finger himself. He's a total boss."

Ravi's father supported his large family on a menial income, and their financial troubles grated on him. He was obsessed with status, asking everyone he met their salaries and carefully selecting clothing that could make him look wealthy at the lowest budget. For Ravi, a police job offered redemption through a potent combination of power and money. When I first met him, he was trying to arrange a large bribe to the local inspector to ensure his selection in the force. It did not work out in the end.

Job seekers like Ravi peppered me with questions about life in the United States. They

constantly texted me in English and commented on my Facebook profile. They got angry if I was ever in the area and forgot to call. But the rickshaw drivers, who had access to the same means of communication, seldom had any questions for me. They respectfully let me hang around, but I was just one passing curiosity among many. While the marketplace and rickshaw stand served as the foci for the motor field, job seekers congregated around the local cellphone repair shop, where they could access the internet, trade exam tips, and hang out. If they wanted to drink, auto boys simply opened beers on the street of the Kinchumanda market. The job-seekers escaped to the woods, or to the roofs of their homes, where no one would bother them.



Fig. 2: Local motor fielders and job-seekers celebrate together at a village wedding in 2023.

For job-seekers, acting like the chaste middle class may have been the first step to joining it, but decency imposed its own set of humiliations. Most job-seekers were also unemployed. What distinguished them from their motor field cousins was their sheer willingness to prolong the

search. Nearly every government job required applicants to pass a difficult exam, so tribal job seekers were more often than not continuously studying for something, continuously working their slim networks, continuously enrolled in distance learning courses that promised success in one or another of India's acronymnal order of exams – the D.Ed, B.Ed, CA/CPT, and the IPSLCE, which was the exam to join the police force. Until that happened, the Valley's job seekers were "*kaali*" – the Telugu word for unemployment, a brand new concept in a place where hardly a generation ago one could always work the soil. The word also meant *emptiness*.

But while the dream of permanent employment promised escape to higher socio-economic status, even my most ambitious respondents eventually came to accept that the system was fundamentally rigged against Agency youth. Candidates were selected based on an opaque combination of scores, bribes, and internal references.

Pakka Local

Ramesh, however, had no interest in that sort of performance. His logic was simple: though the postal route paid well, he was never going to graduate from delivering letters to the small cluster of businesses on the main road from his village. Promotions required expensive bribes and politicking. And the shiny burn marks on his neck from a childhood accident, like torn shirts, cataracts and other stigmata of the poor, were liabilities against his professional advancement. He earned his respect on Kinchumanda's streets, not in some air-conditioned office.

"I had friends growing up who became job holders," Ramesh said one day, as he and the other drivers sat in an auto waiting for their turn. He grimaced. "We don't really talk anymore." By "job holders," Ramesh meant people like those whose ranks his cousin Suresh aspired to join

one day. Suresh lived in the same village but spent an hour each day traveling to the Valley's main town, where he worked as a secretary at an all-girls' high school. Their tension wasn't just about money, since Ramesh was the higher earner between the two. Instead, where Ramesh and his crew claimed their youthful turf outdoors, Suresh disagreed with his cousin's assessment of work. His current job was an indignation, sure, but only temporary until he found real employment. Besides, it offered him unlimited access to the internet, which he used to message Facebook users across the world, asking them about their lives, and Googling images of the exotic places where they lived – Tokyo, New York City, Amsterdam.

Suresh had doe eyes. The motor field boys liked to tease that it meant he was soft. Suresh himself proudly claimed to possess "hooker eyes," which he believed were naturally seductive and would one day help him attract a *nice* girl from a *decent* family – although, as Ramesh was quick to point out, the virginal, office-bound Suresh spent the whole day surrounded by women, but remained inexperienced in love.

"Nobody ever helps me," Suresh liked to often remind me. "All my success I earned because I tried that hard." He understood the responsibilities of work from an early age: in high school, the principal made him head boy, and then during college he worked as an assistant warden in another residential school for tribal children.

Suresh had faith in the rewards of acting decent. He dressed in conservative polyester button-down shirts and slacks, and studied diligently for his teacher placement exams. Still, although he avoided joining the motor field boys on their late night drinking bouts, Suresh obsessively kept track of their exploits. On our treks through the hills behind his village, Suresh loved to share his village's most morbid legends. He once told me a story about Ramesh's older brother Charan, who murdered a woman from the neighboring village for her jewelry, survived the multiple stab

wounds he received from her brothers in revenge, and then successfully hid from the cops by shacking up with a lover in the city. “They are saying he wants to return to the village now and stand in the local election,” he added gleefully.

Suresh belonged to the category of “job seekers.” Although job-seekers enjoyed the privilege of social approval, as a rule, they were more concerned with their motor field counterparts than the other way around. Ashok, the engineering student who referred to the auto drivers as “mass,” would rant to me late into the night about his rickshaw driving friends who, he claimed, had treated their girlfriends with neither romance nor respect, and had no sense of wonder about the outside world. “It pisses me off to see how they behave,” he would say. “They use girls and throw them away, but if a girl leaves them first or denies them then they immediately threaten to commit suicide. Always so dramatic! But I don’t want to start any trouble.”

Ashok’s reflections point out a tension that exists within the job seekers versus motor fielder paradigm. For all the barriers it leads to, education and accessing government jobs provides an opportunity for both young men and women. By rejecting norms of “decency” and pathways towards middle class stability, the Motorfield boys have found a more liberated existence. However, this rebellion through the form of hyper-masculinity remains fundamentally hostile to the young women of Araku valley. When riding with the Motorfield boys, all I could see was talk, and occasional street harassment. Interviews with young women like Chaitanya, who ran a shop near the stand, illustrate the tension women face in navigating changing social norms and upward mobility.

“The boys never mess with me since I won’t tolerate it, but most [Valley] girls don’t think like that. They only see a man who can provide for them,” she said. “All he has to do is buy her a ten-rupee makeup kit and she falls for it. These girls aren’t educated. They don’t mind becoming

someone's second wife even. Sometimes they just want to have a good time. So they go around with these motor-field types, and don't really think about the consequences [of sex]."

As an aspiring teacher, Chaitanya reflects aspirant middle-class views of sexual morality that emphasize a woman's need to protect her purity and, as her comment about education suggests, attribute female reciprocity to naïveté and under-development. But her perspective lays bare the intricate links held in the minds of Indians between education, upper caste notions of purity and decency, and real opportunities for social liberation. It calls into question what is worth holding onto within traditional pathways of development and upward mobility – how can development truly serve oppressed castes while also liberating both women and men?

Conclusion

In this chapter I reflect on how two groups of Araku Valley men – rickshaw drivers and job seekers – make sense of the fact that education leads to nowhere under predatory development. I argue that the physical setting of the rickshaw stand became the site for making symbolic, territorial claims amid the disruptions caused by predatory development to the Valley's traditions of adulthood transition and gender relations. As I showed above, young tribal men turn to informal work in the transportation sector when a traditional agricultural livelihood becomes unfeasible and structural discrimination makes formal employment – the most reliable form of status attainment – extremely difficult to obtain. The low status of rickshaw drivers, however, is mediated by their visibility in the marketplace and the crucial role their service plays in economic life.

Young tribal men working informally in the transportation sector channel a street masculinity to distinguish themselves from middle-class aspirants by exchanging urban fashions, hip-hop

dance moves and strategies for picking up women. They self-consciously mark themselves from "job seekers" in their villages who strive to be "good" in their habits and mannerisms on the road to middle-class success; job seekers don't drink, don't sleep around, and are derided as deluded and virginal by the "motorfield boys." The attitudinal framework held by job seekers, for their part, is more inclusive towards women, who have to navigate gender politics in addition to the social and cultural arenas of upward mobility.

And yet here it is the "disreputable" rickshaw drivers who held relative economic power: they were unionized, they owned their own vehicles, and serviced a clear need in the local economy, in stark contrast with their job seeking brethren who faced extremely slim chances of success. Both rickshaw drivers and job seekers hailed from the same farming villages, often even the same farming households. Here was the production of social differences without the structural conditions they're usually taken to represent. Both groups of young men (and women) marked themselves as better off than their farmer parents, as being a tribal farmer implied that one lived entirely off the land, and only the most disadvantaged identified themselves as "being farmers" rather than simply "doing farming." In that sense, job seekers and motorfield boys were like siblings arguing over what is best for their family's future. Do we make money now or work towards social respectability in the future? Will abandoning ambitious dreams limit us from reaching our potential? And on the other hand, would the powers that be ever admit us into that hallowed country club of the middle class, no matter how hard we try?

Chapter 6
The Sun Always Rises

> "I may not have succeeded in finding a government job, but my life is still better than what my parents had. Why shouldn't I continue doing what I have been doing? The sun always rises, brother, and it always sets. That's no reason to get upset."
>
> *– Esu*

Development in the Valley

In 2023 I returned to the Valley and discovered, to my surprise, much transformation in the landscape. The era of Indian infrastructure development had penetrated the Agency in unfamiliar new ways. Dozens of new hotels had sprouted along the *ghat* road, steadily replacing the darkness of its forest cover with bright lights and colorful signs. A second track was being laid alongside the old single gauge railroad. A new national highway was being constructed along the entire 40km length of the original road from Paderu to Araku, whose tremendous physical transformations of the landscape gave the eerie sense of having witnessed an earthquake. Everywhere, huge bulldozers and trucks have dug up a large ribbon of earth all along the original road that connected every major town and every artery of commerce in the Valley. Now, in a place known all over India for government neglect, huge machines had appeared to excavate entire mountains. Great plumes of red dust arising from everywhere covered everything and everyone along the roadside.

In addition to tearing up many of the existing roadside homes and businesses, the highway was being built some 20 to 30 feet above the original road, submerging the beautiful trees that once ran alongside it in red dirt. Entire villages which had the misfortune of falling along the planned road route were now being engulfed by the new highway project. It was unsettling to see the destruction wrought along the same Araku-Paderu road that I'd always known as one of the most beautiful drives of my life. Then again, this time they seem to be actually building the

highway, with the massive roadbuilding machines providing visible evidence of daily progress along the entire stretch.

Such expensive capital equipment was an unusual sight in Araku, where the defining quality of development was often neglect. Perhaps that was why my friends in the Valley – Venkata Rao chief among them – had eagerly tracked the progress of the highway. Virtually everybody dismissed my questions about why such a new, elevated highway was necessary when it would have been simpler to just repair the potholes on the original. I had assumed that the new highway project would feel disastrous to the villagers, but on the contrary there was great excitement about the project – the locals had figured out non-centralized ways of connecting their villages to the main road, better equipped to capitalize on the State's development schemes.

In earlier years, especially in 2012 when I had first arrived, I was struck to see that the paddy fields and agriculture of the countryside, only older bodies toiling. The youth were nowhere in sight. This was still in the early years of the post-2005 development rush, a core part of which was the mandatory enrollment of all school age children into schools, including residential schools until the 8th grade. But by 2023, the children had come home to the Valley. New residential schools were built in every block, housing all the children of the area — but also giving them the opportunity, for the first time ever, to continue their education. And education continued *en masse*. That this continued well after the minimum requirement by the State – that poor, forest dwelling tribal communities living off of sustenance agriculture were nevertheless raising small fortunes to educate their children as much as they possibly could, and that they continued to do so even after their children returned home early from the cities, unable and unwilling to work in the cutthroat environs of the city, and continued to apply for the government jobs even 10 years after completing their education – clearly demonstrates that in

Araku the continued pursuit of education is a choice, motivated by particular values and visions and logical calculations.

The Perils of Private Jobs in the "Skill Economy"

Despite the continued investment in education, government jobs remained elusive to Adivasi youth. The alternative solution proposed by the government, as we saw in Chapter 4, was known locally as working 'private jobs.' These were the worst of all outcomes, meant only for those with no other options. Private jobs could include any new economy job in the vast informal economy. These could range from non-contractual work in chicken factories and commercial fisheries to assembling flower bouquets for expensive urban weddings. The range of private jobs held by Araku folks was enormous – and to a significant degree, irrelevant to both the workers and the people hiring them. An average migrant worker from the Valley might do three different gigs in three different states over three seasons.

Private companies in India are loathe to hire workers directly, as it would require providing formal employment per law. Doing so would mean bargaining rights, providing benefits and minimum wage. Instead, private sector employers frequently sidestep the rules entirely by simply routing their workforces through a series of subcontractors. A factory floor with 200 workers, for instance, may on paper be an empty factory leased out to dozens of subcontractors, which are themselves controlled by company management. Typically, each subcontractor is small enough to be classified as a small enterprise, freeing its owner from providing formal contracts to employees on its roster – and, by extension, the entire factory floor. This arrangement is illegal but rampant across India, done with impunity and bribes to avoid "paying" for basic rights.

All private jobs functioned in the same way. Nobody applied for "company jobs" like they

would for a government posting or a call center. Instead they were recruited, either by one of the traveling third-party recruiters who went village to village offering jobs to able-bodied men and women, or through a personal acquaintance already working for a private employer somewhere. The recruiters typically brought colorful, laminated brochures that purported to show the generous meals and modern facilities that workers enjoyed on company premises; potential recruits are promised room, board, and monthly salaries as high as 30,000 INR ($356), enough to tempt even the most skeptical observers. Indeed, it is usually the recruiter who must entice rural youth to work for client companies offering (allegedly) good pay and great perks, rather than the other way around; as a rule, the prospect of "company work" failed to excite the Agency's job seekers even when they were desperate for work and needed the money. Working a private job was, in the words of one informant, a "last stand scenario, for when there is nothing left but to starve or survive."

This was because every young, educated Adivasi in the Valley understood that third-party labor agents could not be trusted. The recruiters earned commission on every new worker they wrangled for their clients, often a labor-intensive industry or commercial farm whose business depends on having an unlimited supply of cheap, easily replaced manpower. Incentivized to maximize their own hiring, company recruiters were all too willing to exaggerate the quality of a job's working conditions and grossly inflate its take-home pay. When enough people have accepted his offer, the recruiter escorts his new hires to company premises, which might be located in distant states several hundred miles away. By this point, the new hires are completely reliant on their recruiter, who may not even disclose their destination. They travel overnight to save time, which as an added bonus literally keeps recruits in the dark.

According to Valley folk who had worked company jobs, the typical firm employed hundreds of people in high-volume production for domestic and international supply chains. Though company facilities were nondescript in name and appearance, they nevertheless made their owners fabulously wealthy. Once recruits arrive at the gate, they discover they in fact do not work for the company at all. Despite being a proposed alternative to stable government jobs, private jobs in fact were another means to exploit the young Adivasi. This was especially made clear in the life updates of my old friends Purni, Prem and Esu.

A Return to the Rural Way of Life

After abandoning her degree, Purni enrolled in a two-year certificate program for medical assistants. It would have enabled her to work at a doctor's office, a medical shop, or at one of any number of local health providers. "So that I don't just need a government job but can find a private job as well," she said. But there, too, she was asked to pay a substantial sum in order to receive her final certificate. When she refused, they ended up keeping her 10th certificate as well, effectively rendering her ineligible to compete for any government jobs. She left the experience disillusioned by the whole system of education, which seemed to have turned her sacrifices and hard-earned rupees into little else than false promises.

Purni told me about the private sector offers she had heard from her friends, which involved work in factories and other plants near Visakhapatnam. She said that, needing money and unable (or unwilling) to return to the agrarian lifestyle of their parents, many Agency youth traveled to work in the Vizag factories. Some of her friends encouraged her to join them, speaking enthusiastically about the accommodations and availability of work. But Purni did not like what she saw. The salaries were low, about 10,000 ($125) rupees per month, and usually involved

heavy ‘cuttings’ for food and lodge. Most of the time, she said, workers would end up with 7,000 INR ($88) in hand. “How will you live on that? Better to be here.” So she decided to stay in the Agency, where she could be closer to home and living expenses were much lower.

Prem also shared stories of the risks and perils of taking up private sector jobs. He often brought up the possibility of finding a job and a place to rent somewhere in Visakhapatnam, which is something many of his educated friends did after they got tired of waiting around for government jobs. He seemed to be conflicted about this because he always hastens to explain that such a life is not for him, too risky and not worth it. He spoke of his friend who had just come back to Araku after working at a noodle shop run by a politician. His friend could barely afford the room rent; eventually he gave up and returned home. “Hearing stories like his I get scared,” said Prem. “Makes me think it’s better to be *kaali* [unemployed] and just keep trying for something here.”

Prem was weighing the promise of forward movement, of doing something versus being *kaali*, against the brutal realities of what “doing something” often looked like for Agency youth. He later said that he did, in fact, often consider going to Vizag for work, joining his friend at the noodle shop. But his father had strictly opposed any such ideas, because working at a noodle shop and struggling to pay rent was the least of the horrors experienced by Agency folks who migrated for work.

Mallesh, another young man from the Valley and close friend to Prem, shared horror stories about a thread factory in Guntur where he briefly went to work. A recruiter came to the village and promised a decent salary with good accommodations and food. But at the factory he realized that all such promises were a scam. Any money set aside to house and feed workers was eaten up by some middleman, who might have been the same recruiter. They were told to spend long

hours on the tedious work of gathering and packing dyed threads that the factory sold to clothing companies. Worse, they were told that they wouldn't receive their salary on a weekly or monthly basis, but in a lump sum at the end of their stint.

The most horrifying detail: they weren't allowed to leave. Mallesh described a compound with tall walls, locked gates and guard dogs. When they demanded their salary, threatening to leave if it wasn't paid, a manager claimed that if they left the compound they would be arrested. They were essentially being forced to work without pay while deprived of the freedom to leave: a prison camp. This was modern day slavery.

After three weeks or a month, Mallesh and several others planned a daring escape. In the middle of the night, they climbed onto the roof of an outhouse that was adjacent to the border wall. From there they climbed over the fence and jumped to the other side. On the other side of the wall were deep drainage pits that were left uncovered, which they could barely see in the dark. "But if we fell in there, that would have been the end of it." The guard dogs began to bark, but luckily the security guards did not wake up. They walked for miles and miles along the highway until they finally came across a shared auto that took them into town.

I was floored hearing Mallesh describe his dramatic escape from a factory that wasn't even paying its workers. I am sure many such incidents exist all over the country, but somehow naively held a default assumption that in India, workers could at least physically walk away from a job they didn't like, and therefore they were still making some kind of calculated decision to remain in a brutal exploitative situation. How many workers around the country are simply not permitted to leave? How many, in other words, are slaves?

"Others stayed back at the factory for a year, longer," Mallesh said. "They tell themselves that it's okay." When I voiced my outrage, saying that I ought to report this in the press and put

them out of business, Prem and Mallesh gently reminded me that the factory owners probably had the police, MLAs and judges in their pocket already. The only silver lining was that Mallesh managed to leave after only a month, even though he wasn't paid a single rupee.

Still, the private companies flourish only because they continue to have access to a large pool of cheap labor – that is, labor that can be defrauded and victimized with impunity. The only power Mallesh and others have against them is to refuse to work there at all. But none of these tales of disputes involve some kind of arbitration or successful police or government complaint, because "they're all in their pocket anyway." Prem and Mallesh said that, from the Agency, it was really only the landless people who were lured by promises of company work. People with land, even if they were educated and perpetually unemployed, could at least fall back on farming and NREGA work as they kept trying for a government job. But the landless have little recourse.

The larger takeaway seemed to be the way in which the unregulated private sector serves as the missing link in the puzzle over Indian youth unemployment. The alternative to a government job (or to farming or coolie work in the village) was the extremely morbid, medieval conditions of modern company work. These aren't "traditional" jobs – they are very much insinuated into the flows of the global economy – but the workers might as well be beholden to a *zamindar* (or feudal landlord). The government asks why so many jobs go unfilled, why there is a skill shortage without seriously examining the state of labor relations in the informal economy. These are not jobs that have remained in the past, as is often implied. They are an essential aspect of life and labor in post-liberalization, globalized India. "New" India. They are why educated youth especially hold out perpetually for a government job – because the alternative means a complete loss of freedom, a complete stripping down of individual dignity. The story often told is that educated youth consider themselves too good for blue collar and labor jobs. Perhaps there is

some truth to this, but it is only leveled as an accusation at the rural poor, first generation educated people.

Education, Voice and Power

But despite the new risks of exploitation that education and seeking formal employment brought to Adivasi youth, education provided a newfound sense of agency and power. "The cost of education, room, food, books, fees, all come out to hundreds of thousands of rupees. That's how much everyone is putting in" said Laxmi, 22, a college graduate from the Agency headquarters of Paderu. "Only to end up working at petrol bunks for 5, 10 thousand rupees per month. There are no jobs and our people can't achieve what few there are. Women end up getting married. The boys don't have much patience left. They can't wait. They end up doing anything to get along – working in transport, as mechanics, doing small, small works in the village of the daily labor type. Updating themselves just doesn't happen, and I'm beginning to wonder if it ever will. I'm not sure tribes can update themselves."

As a bright and politically conscious young woman, Laxmi was well aware of the developmental problems and injustices her people faced. But she had begun to despair, not only of the bleak state of affairs in the Agency, but whether tribal people were even capable of ever 'updating themselves.' It was a view shared by only a minority of my interviewees, albeit a significant one.

When I pushed back, citing all the changes I'd witnessed in the Valley, her reply neatly summarized what many Adivasi youth see as the real stakes of tribal development: their evolution into a new category of citizenship as fully empowered, unafraid people.

Vivek: Really? But it seems like even in the last 10 years tribes have really come far. Take yourself for instance. 15 years ago educated women like you in the Agency would have been few and far between. But now we are sitting here having this conversation, freely. Even when I was here 10

years ago, people used to be much less forthcoming when speaking.

Laxmi: When you say 'scared,' it gave me an idea. We are tribes, yeah? No matter how much knowledge we have, we are unable to express it to the outside world. Even I am speaking to you so much, but that courage and daring to do so only came to me after my degree. Until then I was unable to speak with my teachers whom I saw every day. I had friends from the plains who did not focus on their studies, but they could speak confidently anyways. We [tribal students] would not speak up, even if we knew the answer. Why that is, I don't understand. *No matter how much knowledge we have, we cannot speak. We cannot show it.*

Laxmi explained: she herself is an example of someone who is able to "speak confidently" thanks in large part to her education. But she speaks of her experiences as something more fundamental to Adivasi identity, perhaps because it was experienced that way. Being in school with non-tribal students exposed her to a new way of engaging with the world that she understood as necessary, but that also simultaneously reinforced the divide. When she came back home, she brought that back with her and ended up seeing her hometown in a new light. Esu shared a similar sentiment with me in our conversation:

Vivek: How would you explain the things that make life in the Agency different to an outsider like me?

Esu: Additional challenges, that's what I mean…people from the plains can't work hard. Everything for them is like a mind game. Here the people work hard. So long as they're in the same position, no matter what they have, if they need to hustle they can do it. Tribals I mean. The challenges people here have is that, no matter what station in life one attains, their nature doesn't change. Yet they can do whatever people from the plains do. People down there can't work. Their mindset is such that they will always have others do the work, but they are incapable of doing it themselves. Their mindset is like that. They're always looking to be a step higher than you.

Tribals, we have less knowledge, less education. We are given fewer opportunities, no matter how educated we are, when it comes to tribes the fact is we start off with less. We cannot go to a higher step all at once. Even if we get the opportunity it is difficult, we can only progress little by little. In the meanwhile, if there are people hanging over us, playing mind games and trying to take advantage of others, it becomes even harder to get anywhere. Tribes are given very few opportunities.

For our confidence level to grow, we don't have a platform here. If you study outside, then you will understand. You will understand whether other people are moving ahead or falling behind relative to you. If we can get an idea of what our position is, then we too will have the chance to get ahead. Here, everyone being in the same place, being equal, people aren't much concerned about that. So it's rare to find people who really think in that way [about their relative position, ways to improve]. Studying means studying, that's it. You will get a degree but you are hurt by not learning any skills.

To Laxmi, Esu, as well as most of my respondents from Chapter 3, "development means,

first thing, education." Education encompassed not only knowledge found in textbooks but an understanding of the society and the outside world. It meant the tools to navigate the world around you, to speak with others and advocate for yourself, to open doors to new places you could not access before. The elites' attempt to replace formal education and employment with exploitative skill development and predatory "private" jobs did not succeed in diminishing the value of education in providing access to new voice and agency.

A New Spring Blossoms

By 2023, the educated children of Araku Valley were once again living in their home villages. They had not chosen to take up private jobs in the cities. Instead, they had returned to farming, marrying and having children whom they raised in their home village, all the while still choosing to wait out for government jobs. This return to home demonstrated that predatory development did not work – the plans of the Central Government to employ this young, educated, lower caste generation in low end, "skilled" jobs were soundly rejected by my Adivasi respondents, as well as the country at large. Only 20 million people signed up for the Skill India training programs, far short of the 500 million target[37] (MSDE 2024).

Yet, pursuits of formal education continued. Despite the seeming lack of "payoff" in the form of employment, education rates kept climbing. After making immense sacrifices to secure an education, the first ever widely educated generation of tribal people in Araku did not find jobs. But they were not angrily unemployed. Instead, they embraced a return home, choosing to opt out of the exploitative options put forth in front of them. By bringing into question the belief ordinary Indians had that education would automatically lead to upward mobility, predatory

[37] Per MSDE figures from Aug. 2024 (accessed Feb. 2025) <https://shorturl.at/AN7yD>.

development instead reinforced the value of education in enabling political choices that reinforced individual autonomy. Because of predatory development practices, Adivasi youth became much less likely to believe that what the government could offer was a good thing, allowing them to make political choices around their own livelihoods – including returning home and taking up farming at the expense of higher salaries – that instead reinforced their own autonomy and agency. In this way, this younger generation of educated Adivasis were the latest in a long line of tribal resistance against State incursions on local autonomy.

Although the vast majority of respondents identified as being unemployed for years, education still served as an important moral marker in their personal accounts both in terms of continued optimism over the possibility of future middle-class employment, as well as their rejection of readily available but exploitative 'private sector' (i.e. unorganized and informal) jobs as "unsuited for educated persons." Even if education could not provide a means to middle-class employment for these Adivasi youth, it remained an invaluable source of personal dignity and self-worth that was previously the monopoly of the Indian upper castes.

That personal dignity and self-worth was on display. This generation of Adivasi youth leveraged their education to find new ways of supporting their families and communities without leaving the Valley. Villages are more connected now, with widespread power and cellphone connections. On my return to Araku, I noticed a new kind of spring blossom had come back to the Valley. It came from freshly planted sunflowers, which the local villagers planted on their family fields to attract Instagram-hungry tourists (for a small fee). While many of the Adivasis still did not have enough money to buy their own hotels, they realized they could advertise "Adventure Camping" through newly launched websites, buying tents and sleeping bags to prop in their fields. If the tourist industry had shut out tribal people before, education had helped tribal

people find new ways of entering the tourism industry on their own terms. Even the non-tribal businessmen of the Valley, who had become so accustomed to acquiring Adivasi lands and labor for a song, had noticed a change. “Tribal people have gotten too smart,” one chicken shop owner complained. “Can you believe one guy asked for 50% partnership to build a hotel on his land?” Real development had reached the Valley at last.

Despite the rejection of private sector jobs and the return to their roots, the search for government jobs continues. Prem is still at home, and still investing in his education. He assures me, “one of these days I will get it.” Esu maintains a more optimistic outlook on life: “I may not have succeeded in finding a government job but my life is still better than what my parents had. Why shouldn’t I continue doing what I have been doing? The sun always rises, brother, and it always sets.”

Conclusion

Araku Valley is a small town surrounded by villages, a place where everyone knows each other or at least *of* each other. The frequency of my visits over a long time frame allowed me to intimately know the town, and for the town to know me in return. In addition to the main cohort of 45 or so adivasi youth, I become acquainted with an extended constellation of their friends and family, tribal development workers, local officials, farmers, shop owners and so on. And 11 years is a long time to know anyone, let alone your ethnographic subjects. Over this period, I flitted in and out of my respondents' lives, watching them emerge from the irrepressible optimism of youth, face the world, fall in love, start families, study for one placement exam after and another, and make plans upon plans to salvage their humble dreams of a regular job, as they waited for any opportunity to come through. And waited, and waited. I watched as their educations begin with tantalizing possibilities, then as the opportunity structures they were promised – i.e. reserved government jobs for the best students – fray and soon fall apart, and finally as they are forced to accept that the teaching and nursing jobs they aspired toward either don't exist or were captured by rich and politically-connected people. I watched them grow older, wiser and wearier, aging with them too.

By 2017, my Araku cohort realizes they have more or less been labeled as unskilled & unemployable, members of unfathomably large generation non-upper caste youth who tried to study their way out of caste occupations, and were now deemed a "demographic burden" for their efforts. All they wanted was to be teachers or nurses, not Supreme Court justices or professional cricket players. In the early days, when development was too new to seem predatory, and education was still a historic opportunity for many promising Adivasi children and proud Agency parents, I witnessed the community place bets on which of the class toppers

would find a placement first. Adivasis knew better than anyone not to expect a life without hardships, but no one suspected that finding work, of all things, would become such an impossible mirage. The rules for government jobs were clearly defined and had worked for many Agency graduates in the past: get the right certificate, score about a certain percentage on the qualifying exam, and wait for the call. Back then I shared in this optimism myself, wondering how much the Agency would change once all the kids go off to their 9-to-5s, and no one is left to farm. Anticipating imminent social transformation any day, I kept returning to my field site only to find things remained stubbornly where they last stood.

A unique advantage of ethnographic data spanning 11 years is it lets us witness how people who share a certain set of beliefs and expectations about the world – the belief that the lack of educational access caused tribal poverty, the expectations that at least the brightest and hardest working Adivasi youth would find a way out of it – can collectively renegotiate them when things do not work out according to plan. I argue that predatory development is best examined from the perspective of marginalized people over time, as it allows us to methodologically distinguish perverse justifications about adivasi unemployability from genuine concerns over education quality, which are conflated by design in top-down analyses. My Araku respondents were well aware of the limitations imposed on tribal students; they were also aware of their own scholastic talents, and how their abilities compared with students from the plains. These were relatively constant variables. The dramatic and inexplicable change was in the way they were perceived and categorized by the rest of the world.

The six empirical chapters examine the rapid rise and collapse of education-based mobility as experienced by some of the most marginalized and impoverished people in an already poor country: the first fully literate generation of Scheduled Tribe youth in the eastern Indian

highlands, the first ever to widely attend school and engage with the outside world. Drawing on extended ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews, the chapters follow a cohort of adivasi youth (ages 19-37) as they come of age in Araku Valley between 2012 and 2023. The first three chapters examine 1) the contentious politics of exclusion and development in my field site, Araku Valley; and 2) the immense value placed on education by people most oppressed by the Indian caste system, which has historically justified their complete exclusion from formal schooling.

Chapter 4 analyzes what I argue is the primary mechanism of predatory development in action: the incoherent national alarm over "skill shortages" and "unemployability" emerging just as large numbers of lower caste students finally accessed higher education and demanded entry into upper caste-dominated formal employment. Chapters 5 & 6 examine how this cohort copes with the traumatic devaluation of their efforts by returning to "traditional livelihoods" as farmers – yet simultaneously reshaping the political economy of tribal areas as they assert new forms of economic agency and resist old forms of tribal exploitation. While some young men drop job aspirations to work in transportation, many keep the dream alive. Surprisingly, not a single respondent agreed with the statement that their education was a waste of time and money, and almost all of them moved back home, preferring to farm and keep trying their chances from the comfort and security of their villages.

I try to show that the intense desires of marginalized Indian youth to "become an educated person" is rooted as much in education's transformative potential – the promise of dignity and of a different category of personhood – as it is in economic and labor market calculations; relational caste histories and anti-caste accounts of education became especially salient when it failed to materialize in gainful employment.

Even when denied formal opportunities for upward mobility, like white collar employment, Adivasi youth continued to nurture the networks and study circles they created as students, finding ways to fulfill the role of an upstanding, educated person at home, where their studies and capabilities could be put to use in countless ways, whether to obtain official documentation for the family land, escort an elderly aunt to the city hospital, or to invest in the budding tribal-operated tourism industry, which came up with ingenious and inexpensive ways for adivasis to finally benefit from the tourism coming to their area. Even in so-called failure, I want to call attention to the ways in which tribal youth could still make use of their education to improve the conditions of their own lives and communities – a new awareness that dramatically curtailed outsider exploitation of adivasis. No longer could an unscrupulous city businessman purchase prime tribal land for a song, or defraud illiterate farmers with false weights. Even the most wizened, traditional grandmother would always have a son or niece or grandson quick to protect her from classic exploitative practices (although new, digital cons also emerged, of course). Even the motor field "drop outs" had figured it out: they were all running their own businesses now, constantly finding new hustles, and constantly present in one another's lives.

Sociological Contributions of this Work

Caste, to paraphrase Ambedkar, is a division of labor*ers*, a "hierarchy in which the laborers are graded one above the other." Unlike white supremacy, which is rooted in ownership of people and property, Brahminical supremacy established hegemonic control over knowledge itself, with an unwritten yet elaborate moral framework that codified both people and knowledge as either sacred or profane, restricting formal learning and education from all but a privileged few (Ambedkar 1968). For Dalits and other outcaste groups, especially, even accidentally

overhearing Sanskrit shlokas uttered by a Brahmin was a crime punishable by molten lead poured into the offending ear (ibid.). Dalit reformers had long championed literacy as *the* precondition for their emancipation, because education directly challenged Brahmins' exclusive claims to knowledge over rituals, rights, and their interpretations (Phule 1885). Education, in other words, enabled one to transform into a different *category* of person, transcending the conditions of their birth, and their caste. On the other hand, the social respect conferred on educated people in modern India broke down once lowered caste students started enrolling in higher education en masse; incoherent policy panics over skill shortages, "unemployability," and "worthless" degrees all worked to subdue the threat to the status quo by reconfiguring the social division of laborers such that educational credentials disproportionately pursued by lowered caste students, such as those taught in non-English mediums, would once again function as markers of low caste, "worthless" individuals.

U.S.-based research on predatory inclusion works on the backdrop of race, in which racism interacts with mechanisms like credit scoring to systematically "downgrade" people of color into adverse, seemingly objective categories. Racist notions about black and brown people translate into higher interest rates, lower credit scores, higher premiums and so on, ultimately ensuring their financial default or delinquency in the very programs intended to bring them into the fold. This in turn paves the way for a host of predatory practices targeting marginalized people thus rendered as subprime borrowers, further entrenching their relative disadvantage.

What if the same mechanisms were at work but the context changed? What if the underlying rules changed? If education is a mechanism of predatory inclusion in India, then we must ask how the logic of caste may warp it and help induce the unwanted outcomes. Given the way knowledge and learning function as organizing principles of caste, which in turn works on the

ontological categories into which people are sorted, we would need to pay attention to the ways in which *ontological distinctions* get made between people, making certain types of market interactions impossible for certain sets of actors, and ways in which education represents a claim to join new categories of being/personhood. For example, many tribal respondents expressed a strong desire to become "decent, educated" people, implying education can help them transcend their ontological status as subhuman adivasis.

In the caste hierarchy of India, we don't even need to examine the market action of predatory inclusion/education to witness its effects, which comes out in how people are talked about and (re)defined as worthy or not. For instance, vast swathes of upwardly mobile groups were redefined as unemployable or unskilled based on nothing but shifting, hypothetical definitions of skill that excluded everyone but the English speaking elite. As with Lower Ed or Predatory Inclusion, new rules define people who were previously made the mark as high-risk, subprime or, in my case, unemployable. The rules of the whole game shift to claim that people educated "beyond their station" so to speak are actually not so educated, and in any case unlikely to secure the basic permanent employment they so desire. So their best bet is to take up low end jobs in the new economy, for which we are happy to train you.

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Appendix A

Building an Indian Skills Discourse Corpus

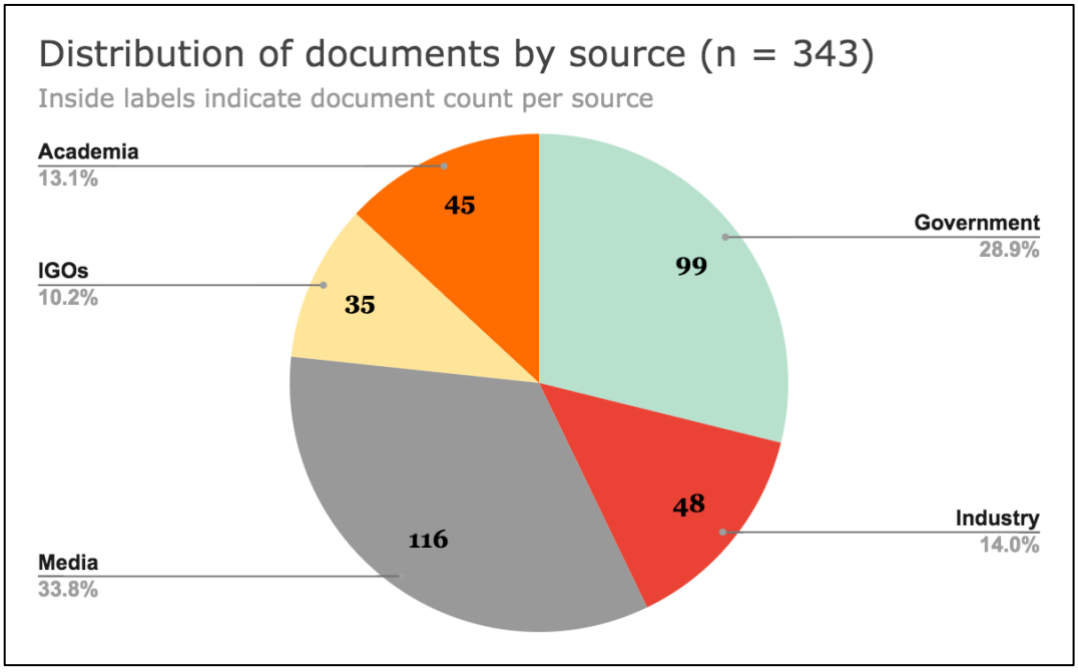


Fig. 1: The distribution of the document corpus by source shows the dominance of elite public and private sector speakers in skill development discourse (both groups comprise the vast majority of speakers in the media category).

The 344 documents included in the final analysis of this corpus were gathered in 2020 and 2021, and consist of a set of policy debates, reports and legal documents pertaining to how Skill Development in India is discussed, defined and promoted. I began by conducting a keyword search on mainstream media, academic and government databases to find discourse on "skills" as well as arguments made in favor or against[38]. The specific databases included Proquest, India Kanoon, official Indian government websites and various library databases; I was interested in any discourse specifically reference skill development and policy solutions to youth

[38] **Keywords**: Skill Development, Skill Gap, Skill India, Skilling. Job Training. Demographic Dividend, Employability, Youth Unemployment.

unemployment in the Indian context.

I also looked up and downloaded any reports or speeches referenced in multiple texts. And since skill development/TVET was a policy concern since the early days of independence, I included historical World Bank and Indian policy documents, as well as similar policies in other countries, for background. Finally, I extended my search to include results stretching as far back as 1980, or earlier when possible, in order to gain a better historical understanding of *when* "skill" came to be an explicit policy idea discussed in the English-language (and upper caste-dominated) Indian context.

This resulted in a rather substantial qualitative database (13,664 pages) featuring a wide assortment of laws, parliamentary debates, English newspaper op-eds, research by government, international orgs and private sector, panel discussions, scholarly articles, some Facebook groups like "Skilling You!". I downloaded and indexed each item on a Google Sheet, categorized them by publication source (Media, Minutes, etc.), and added details such as document "type" and speaker identity (e.g. corporate employer, bureaucrat). Finally, as part of a separate analysis, I assembled as a secondary corpus of 2,838 training curricula for individual occupations developed for the Skill India Mission.

The following table summarizes the final corpus of texts I analyzed by type, source and time period. Figure 1 (above) depicts the distribution of documents by source. Fig. 2 plots number of documents by year of publication, showing how Indian "skills" discourse is a recent phenomenon.

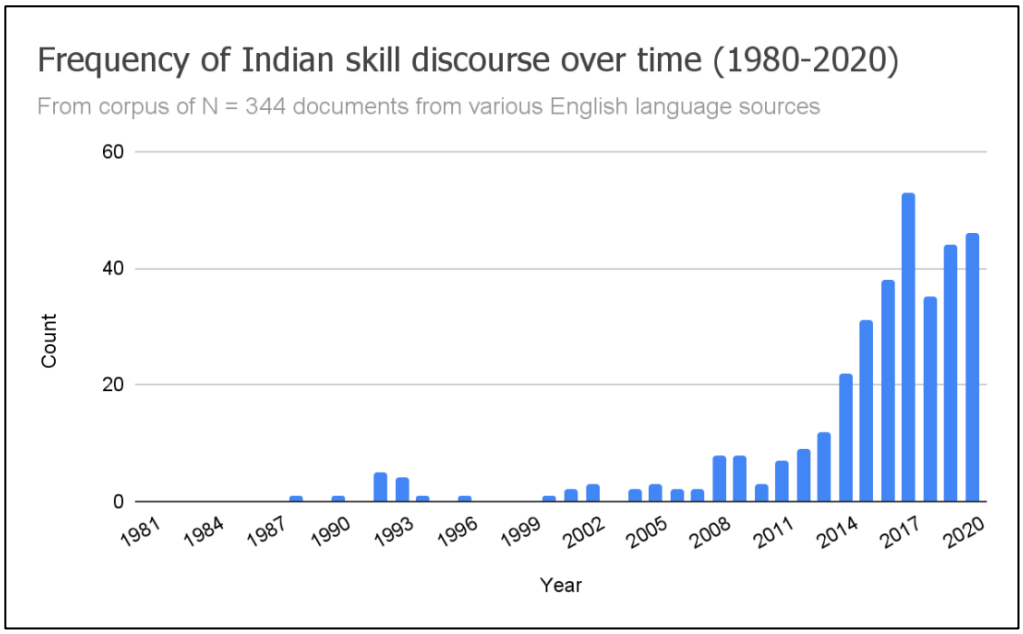


Figure 2: Frequency of Indian skill discourse over 1980-2020, based on 344 archival documents gathered

Publisher Type	Description	Sources	Time Period	# of Documents
Government	Any Indian gov't policies, official reports, state-funded studies, or parliamentary debates on skill development	Publicly accessible official records available online	1951-2020	71
Media	Press reports, news editorials & digital media about Indian skill crisis	News websites; Proquest archives; Youtube	2007-2020	116
Industry	Private sector reports on skills and employability	Industry websites via Google search	2006-2020	48
Academia	Scholarship on TVET/Skill Dev	Google scholar, Academic journals	1954-2020	45
International Orgs	Papers and Policy Recs on Skill	ILO, World Bank, UN, OECD, British	1990-2020	35

	Dev/TVET by major int'l orgs	Council websites		