



Why They Learn: A Thematic Exploration of Enrollment Motivations in Skill Development Programs

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Abstract

This research explores the factors that motivate certified trainees in West Bengal, India, to participate in short-term skill development programs. The study examines open-ended survey feedback from 116 certified trainees using thematic coding and applies chi-square tests to investigate the relationships between motivations and demographic characteristics. The results reveal that the primary motivations consist of acquiring skills, securing employment, and striving for self-sufficiency. Although differences in motivation based on gender were not statistically significant, caste identity had a notable impact on motivational priorities, particularly regarding employment and skill acquisition. These findings highlight the importance of creating inclusive policy frameworks that address economic needs as well as social inequalities. The research calls for focused outreach, improved placement services, and flexible training curricula to better meet the various aspirations of trainees.

Keywords

Caste, Gender, Motivation, Enrolment, Skill Training, Skill India

Introduction

The ongoing economic transformation in India, alongside its demographic dividend, has increased the significance of skill development as a driver of inclusive growth. National initiatives like the Skill India Mission strive to narrow the gap between education and employability, especially for youth and marginalized groups. Despite considerable investments in policy, participation and outcomes in short-term skill training programs vary significantly across different social groups.

While previous research has assessed the effectiveness of vocational education and training programs, there is limited insight into the motivations that lead individuals to enroll—particularly within the Indian context. Understanding these motivations is crucial, as they influence not only participation but also levels of engagement and results. Earlier studies indicate that motivations may encompass the desire for employment, economic improvement, self-sufficiency, personal development, and formal qualifications. These factors are often affected by overlapping social identities such as gender and caste, which can influence access to training and job market opportunities.

Most current literature has concentrated on program results or barriers to participation, with minimal focus on the intricate, individual-level factors that affect enrollment decisions. This oversight is particularly apparent when examining the differing experiences of women and individuals from historically marginalized castes. Consequently, policy initiatives may fail to address the varied and changing needs of the target population.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by thoroughly investigating the motivations of certified trainees enrolled in short-term skill training programs in West Bengal, a state characterized by a diverse socio-economic environment and active execution of the Utkarsh Bangla scheme. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research analyzes qualitative survey data to: (a) uncover prevalent motivation themes; (b) compare patterns by gender and caste; and (c) evaluate the implications for policy and program design. The findings are intended to guide the development of more inclusive and responsive strategies for skill development.

Economic Aspirations and Employability

The prospect of employment and economic growth frequently ranks as a key reason for individuals to enroll in skill development programs. According to a report by the National Skill Development Corporation in 2023 (NSDC, 2023), many trainees identified job placement, earning potential, and entrepreneurship as primary motivations for pursuing vocational courses. Likewise, the International Labour Organization's 2024 report noted that young people in India often regard skill training as a means to overcome unemployment and enhance their employability.

A study conducted by Kumar et al. in 2019, which utilized NSSO 2011–12 data, provided empirical evidence that higher wages and job prospects significantly drive participation in vocational training programs in India.

Despite these findings, much of the current literature depends on extensive surveys or administrative data, often lacking in-depth qualitative insights into individual motivations. Furthermore, few studies have systematically examined how these motivations differ across various social identities, including caste and gender. The present study seeks to fill that void by merging thematic analysis of open-ended responses with statistical testing, offering a richer and intersectional understanding of the reasons individuals—especially in West Bengal—opt to participate in short-term skill development programs. By anchoring the analysis in both empirical findings and lived experiences, this research adds to a context-sensitive and inclusive perspective on technical and skill development policy.

Social and Family Influence

Family encouragement, peer influence, and community networks play a substantial role in shaping enrolment decisions in skill development programs, particularly among women and first-generation learners. Prior research has documented that social support systems often act as catalysts for participation. Annual Status of Education Report, 2023 highlighted a role model effect, where youth were inspired to join skill programs after witnessing community members benefit from them.

While there are many studies to understand the motivation in enrolment, some underscore the importance of social influence, they often treat youth as a homogenous group and lack intersectional analysis. Most do not disaggregate findings by caste or gender, nor do they explore how motivations vary across different social identities. Additionally, many rely on large-scale surveys or administrative data, which may overlook the nuanced, personal reasons behind enrolment.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a qualitative survey analysis of certified trainees in West Bengal, combining thematic coding of open-ended responses with statistical testing. By examining how motivations differ across gender and caste, the research offers a more granular understanding of the social dynamics influencing skill development participation. These insights are particularly valuable for designing inclusive policies and community-based outreach strategies that resonate with diverse trainee groups. Gender, Caste, and Socio-Cultural Dynamics

Gender, Caste and Social Group

Support from family, influence from peers, and community networks play important roles in the decision-making process for enrollment in skill development programs, particularly for women and those learning new skills for the first time. Prior research indicates that social support systems often act as driving forces for participation. The Annual Status of Education Report, 2023, highlighted a role model effect, where young people were motivated to join skill programs by witnessing the advantages experienced by community members.

Although several studies have been conducted to investigate the factors motivating enrollment, some highlight the role of social influence but tend to treat youth as a homogenous group, lacking an intersectional approach. Most research does not disaggregate results by caste or gender and fails to explore how motivations can vary across different social identities. Additionally, many studies rely on expansive surveys or administrative data, which may overlook the nuanced, individual motivations for enrollment.

Intrinsic Motivation and Interest in Learning

While the majority of trainees participate in short-term skill development programs due to economic or employment motivations, a smaller subset is motivated by intrinsic factors—such as personal curiosity, interest, or the ambition for self-improvement. These internal motivations showcase a learner's desire to gain skills for personal fulfillment rather than for external benefits. Research indicates that intrinsic motivation can improve both engagement and learning results, particularly when learners feel a sense of autonomy and relevance in their training (Harris & Clayton, 2020). In a study conducted in India, Arulmani et al. (2003) discovered that students who had a strong personal interest in learning were more

inclined to seek skill acquisition that connected with their passions, even in the absence of immediate employment opportunities.

This research contributes to the sparse literature by highlighting intrinsic motivation as a common theme among certified trainees in West Bengal. These results underscore the importance of training programs that cater to learners' internal aspirations, in addition to providing economic incentives.

Current Study

This research expands on previous literature by comprehensively examining the reasons that incentivize certified trainees to participate in short-term skill development programs in West Bengal, India. While earlier studies have investigated the outcomes of vocational training and obstacles to participation, relatively few have focused on the intricate, individual-level motivations for joining short-term skill training programs—especially through an intersectional perspective.

To fill this void, the study utilizes a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Primary data were gathered through a structured survey given to 116 certified trainees from five key skill sectors. The survey contained closed-ended questions regarding demographics (such as gender, caste, and sector) as well as an open-ended question addressing reasons for enrollment.

Qualitative responses were examined through thematic coding to uncover significant motivational themes, while quantitative analysis involved cross-tabulations and chi-square tests to explore differences among gender and caste groups. This combined methodology allows for a more nuanced understanding of how social identities shape skilling ambitions and provides empirical data to guide the development of more inclusive and effective skill development policies.

By concentrating on certified trainees and exploring motivations at the enrollment stage, this study offers a more grounded and context-specific interpretation of skill training in India. It underscores the varied aspirations of trainees and the necessity of crafting programs that accommodate both economic needs and individual ambitions.

Methodology

Research Design

This research utilizes a multiple-method research framework that combines both quantitative and qualitative data to investigate the reasons why certified trainees participate in short-term skill development programs in West Bengal, India. Multi-method approaches are well-regarded for their capacity to offer an in-depth understanding of intricate social issues by merging statistical precision with contextual insight (Creswell John W. & Clark Vicki L. Plano, 2017)

Sampling and Data Collection

Primary data were collected via a structured survey administered through tele calling to 259 certified trainees who had completed short-term skill training programs in West Bengal. Of these, 116 certified trainees responded to the survey.

The survey instrument included:

- Closed-ended questions capturing demographic variables (gender, caste, sector)
- One open-ended item asking: *“What motivated you to enroll in this training?”*

Measures

Demographic variables included:

- **Gender** (Male/Female)
- **Caste** (General, OBC, SC/ST)

The primary qualitative variable was the open-ended response on enrollment motivation. These responses were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, a flexible and widely used method for identifying patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Data Analysis

- **Qualitative Analysis:** Responses were analyzed using multi-label thematic coding, enabling categorization of each response under several motivation themes. This method reflects the complex nature of trainee aspirations.
- **Quantitative Analysis:** Cross-tabulations and chi-square tests of independence were performed to evaluate the relationships between motivation themes and demographic variables. The chi-square test is suitable for categorical data and is widely employed in social science research (Agresti, 2018)

All analyses were carried out using Microsoft Excel, which offered adequate capabilities for descriptive statistics and categorical comparisons.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and verbal informed consent was acquired from all participants. Data were anonymized before analysis to maintain confidentiality and uphold ethical standards.

Results and Interpretation

Descriptive Profile of Respondents

A total of 116 certified trainees participated in the survey. Among these, 86 (74.1%) were female and 30 (25.9%) were male. Regarding social background, 76 (65.5%) of the respondents belonged to the General category, 20 (17.2%) were from the OBC category, and 20 (17.2%) identified as SC/ST. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents by gender and caste.

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

| Gender | Count |
|--------|-------|
| Female | 86 |
| Male | 30 |

Table 2: Caste Distribution of Respondents

| Caste | Count |
|---------|-------|
| General | 76 |
| OBC | 20 |
| SC/ST | 20 |

Motivation Themes: Frequency and Illustrative Responses

An examination of the open-ended answers showed a variety of reasons driving trainees to participate in short-term skill development initiatives. Table 3 displays the frequency of the primary motivational themes. The majority of respondents indicated multiple motivations, highlighting the complex nature of their goals.

Table 3: Frequency of Motivation Themes

| Motivation Theme | Count |
|---------------------------|-------|
| Employment | 21 |
| Skill Acquisition | 85 |
| Self-Sufficiency | 5 |
| Entrepreneurship/Business | 22 |
| Certification | 9 |
| Interest/Hobby | 6 |

The primary motivations identified were 'Employment', 'Skill Acquisition', and 'Self-Sufficiency/Self-Dependence'. Other motivations, although less prevalent, included entrepreneurship, formal certification, and personal interest.

Comparative Analysis by Gender and Caste

Tables 4 and 5 display the frequency and percentage of respondents highlighting each major motivation theme, categorized by gender and caste. For female respondents, 'Skill Development/New Skill' was the most frequently cited motivation, while the same was true for male respondents as well. Among different caste groups, 'Skill Development/New Skill' was predominantly mentioned by General category respondents, and it was similarly noted by OBC, as well as SC/ST individuals. These findings indicate noteworthy yet subtle differences in motivational priorities shaped by social identities.

Table 4: Motivation Themes by Gender

| Motivation Theme | Female (n) | Female (%) | Male (n) | Male (%) |
|---------------------------|------------|------------|----------|----------|
| Employment | 14 | 16.3 | 7 | 23.3 |
| Skill Acquisition | 63 | 73.3 | 22 | 73.3 |
| Self-Sufficiency | 5 | 5.8 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Entrepreneurship/Business | 17 | 19.8 | 5 | 16.7 |
| Certification | 7 | 8.1 | 2 | 6.7 |
| Interest/Hobby | 6 | 7.0 | 0 | 0.0 |

Table 5: Motivation Themes by Caste

| Motivation Theme | General (n) | General (%) | OBC (n) | OBC (%) | SC/ST (n) | SC/ST (%) |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| Employment | 19 | 25.0 | 1 | 5.0 | 1 | 5.0 |
| Skill Acquisition | 50 | 65.8 | 18 | 90.0 | 17 | 85.0 |
| Self-Sufficiency | 3 | 3.9 | 2 | 10.0 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Entrepreneurship/Business | 13 | 17.1 | 4 | 20.0 | 5 | 25.0 |
| Certification | 6 | 7.9 | 1 | 5.0 | 2 | 10.0 |
| Interest/Hobby | 6 | 7.9 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 |

Statistical Significance Testing

Chi-square tests were conducted to determine if the occurrence of each main motivation theme varied significantly based on gender or caste. No significant statistical association was established between gender and any motivation theme. However, a statistically significant association was identified between caste and the following themes: Employment and Skill Acquisition ($p < 0.05$). These results imply that social identity, particularly caste, may influence the motivational priorities of trainees.

Table 6: Chi-square Test Results for Motivation Themes by Gender and Caste

| Motivation Theme | Gender Chi² | Gender p-value | Gender Sig. | Caste Chi² | Caste p-value | Caste Sig. |
|---------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|------------|---------------|------------|
| Employment | 0.35 | 0.556 | No | 7.07 | 0.029 | Yes |
| Skill Acquisition | 0.00 | 1.000 | No | 6.44 | 0.040 | Yes |
| Self-Sufficiency | 0.69 | 0.408 | No | 2.49 | 0.287 | No |
| Entrepreneurship/Business | 0.01 | 0.918 | No | 0.66 | 0.719 | No |
| Certification | 0.00 | 1.000 | No | 0.36 | 0.837 | No |
| Interest/Hobby | 1.01 | 0.314 | No | 3.33 | 0.189 | No |

4.5. Summary of Key Findings

The comprehensive analysis of motivations among certified trainees in short-term skill training programs uncovers several key patterns:

- Multi-faceted Motivations:** A majority of respondents indicated multiple motivations for enrollment, most frequently citing skill development, job placement, and self-sufficiency. These themes highlight both practical and aspirational factors influencing enrollment decisions.
- Gender Similarities:** A comparative analysis reveals that male and female trainees exhibit largely similar motivating patterns, with no statistically significant differences across any motivation theme.
- Caste-based Differences:** Caste identity serves as a significant differentiator in two main areas: 'Employment' and 'Skill Acquisition'. These findings suggest that social background plays a critical role in influencing the motivational landscape for skill development participation, indicating a need for targeted support and inclusive policies.
- Rich Qualitative Insights:** Thematic coding alongside direct quotes emphasizes the varied aspirations of trainees—from economic advancement to personal growth and self-reliance—providing valuable context for interpreting the statistical findings.

Collectively, these findings present an empirical foundation for crafting more responsive, inclusive, and effective skill development initiatives.

Discussion

This study examined the motivations for enrolling in short-term skill development programs among certified trainees in West Bengal. By employing a mixed-methods approach, it identified various motivations—most notably skill acquisition, job prospects, and self-sufficiency. While differences based on gender were statistically insignificant, caste identity significantly impacted motivational priorities, particularly regarding employment and skill development. These findings highlight the intricate relationship between personal aspirations and social identity in shaping choices related to skill training.

Although this study focused on personal motivations, it is crucial to recognize the influence of structural factors—such as free tuition, the accessibility of training centers, certification, and placement guarantees—as external enablers that interact with individual aspirations. Research by Sharma & King (2019) indicates that when training programs are financially accessible and conveniently located, participation rates increase, especially among low-income and rural communities. These structural attributes do not function in a vacuum; they either enhance or limit personal motivations depending on the

trainee's social context. For instance, the aspiration for self-sufficiency may be more attainable when training is available nearby and includes job placement assistance. Therefore, program design should take into account both intrinsic motivations and external enablers to achieve true inclusivity and effectiveness.

By merging thematic analysis with statistical testing, this study enriches the understanding of motivations behind enrollment in short-term skilling programs across India. It addresses a significant gap by investigating how motivations differ among gender and caste, while also emphasizing the interaction between personal aspirations and structural conditions. These insights are crucial for developing skill development policies that align with the lived experiences of diverse trainee groups.

Policy and Practice Implications

The results of the study carry several significant implications for the formulation and execution of short-term skill development initiatives. The outcomes of this research provide various actionable recommendations for those involved in the creation and administration of short-term skill development programs:

1. Targeted Outreach for Marginalized Groups

In light of the strong correlation between caste and motivations for skill development and job placement, outreach efforts should be customized to cater specifically to the distinct requirements of marginalized communities. This encompasses:

- Mobilization at the community level
- Message delivery that respects cultural contexts
- Utilization of local role models and peer support networks

2. Gender-Responsive Programming

Although gender differences in motivation were not statistically significant, qualitative data suggest that both men and women pursue economic advancement and self-sufficiency. Programs should:

- Guarantee safe and easily accessible training spaces
- Provide gender-appropriate vocational options and adaptable schedules
- Include female instructors and advisors

3. Integrated Career Services

The strong emphasis on job-related motivations highlights the necessity of effective career assistance. Programs should:

- Enhance connections with employers
- Offer career guidance and training for job preparedness
- Assist with placement after training and provide follow-up services

4. Recognition of Multi-Faceted Motivations

Participants engage in skill development for numerous reasons, such as entrepreneurship, certification, and personal enhancement. Programs should:

- Provide modular and adaptable course frameworks
- Integrate life skills and entrepreneurial training
- Recognize informal learning experiences and hobbies

5. Structural Enablers as Catalysts

Structural elements like free tuition, proximity of training centers, and certification incentives serve as external supports that elevate individual motivations.

- Offer stipends and pathways to certification
- Oversee the quality and relevance of training content

6. Continuous Monitoring and Feedback

Consistent collection of motivation data can assist in tailoring programs to shifting aspirations and labor market conditions. This includes:

- Conducting periodic surveys and establishing feedback mechanisms
- Analyzing data separately by gender, caste, and region
- Making real-time adjustments to program content

Limitations

Despite its strengths, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample, while diverse, consists of certified trainees from a select range of sectors and districts in West Bengal, potentially limiting the applicability of the findings to other regions, sectors, or trainee demographics throughout India. The reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response biases, such as social desirability and memory inaccuracies, which could impact the trustworthiness of the motivations and demographic information reported. Additionally, the cross-sectional design limits the capacity to observe changes in motivations or outcomes over time, constraining insights into longitudinal dynamics. The qualitative aspect, while valuable, lacks the depth typically achieved through more comprehensive methods like in-depth interviews or focus group discussions. Furthermore, the lack of systematic assessment of potentially influential factors—such as prior education, family support, and local labor market conditions—suggests the presence of unaccounted confounding variables that might have influenced both motivations and outcomes. Being aware of these limitations allows for a more nuanced understanding of the findings and emphasizes the need for future research to bridge these gaps.

Conclusion

A well-grounded examination of the motivations driving participation in short-term skill training initiatives in West Bengal reveals a complex interaction of economic, personal, and social factors. The primary motivational elements identified include skill acquisition, enhanced job prospects, and aspirations for personal independence. While gender-based variations in motivation do not appear statistically significant, caste identity influences particular motivational priorities, underscoring the necessity for inclusive and context-aware program design. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the research enriches our knowledge of participant aspirations and the socio-cultural factors shaping skill development in India. These findings highlight the urgent requirement for adaptive policy frameworks and versatile training models that cater to the changing needs of diverse participant groups. Building on these insights, future research and programmatic innovations can foster more equitable and effective skill development endeavors.

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