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Professionalism as a soft skill: the social construction of worker identity in India's new services economy

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ABSTRACT

Once a popular buzzword for multinational corporations, 'professionalism' has now become a common catchphrase in India's emerging services economy. Today, youth aspiring to join entry-level services roles such as those in call centres, retail, and coffee shops undergo intense and regimented trainings to become 'professional', learning to regulate their bodies, behaviours, language, and overall identities, to fit into diverse and fast-paced 'servicescapes'. Whereas literature exploring notions of professionalism in India's growing services sectors has emphasised their corporate-western and disciplinary-ideological dimensions, more recent scholarship has begun to document how workers themselves perceive, experience and shape these notions. Drawing from this scholarship and ethnographic research conducted in a skills training centre in Pune city in western India, this paper explores how professionalism has increasingly become entwined with the discourse of 'soft skills' even at the margins of India's new services economy, and how it is being transmitted, questioned, and (re-)interpreted. The paper thus offers a grounded social constructivist view of professionalism, as not something that is simply imposed unimpeded upon passive neoliberal subjects by a powerful state and corporate actors, but rather as continually inflected by those who profess, teach and embody it, in line with local lived realities, experiences, values and belief systems.

Introduction

Over the last 30 years, India has become distinctive among the world's developing nations for the rapid transformation and expansion of its new services economy. In the decades following liberalisation, India shifted decisively from a relatively 'low-growth' agrarian economy towards a 'high-growth' services-led model of economic development (Eichengreen and Gupta 2011, 2013; Nayyar 2012). Although much of the literature on the 'new services' sector in India has focussed on the higher-end exports-led services and their constituent workforce (see eg D'Cruz and Noronha 2009; Krishnamurthy 2018; Raman and Koka 2015, etc.), it is evident that the sector today contains a more diverse group of private actors and activities spread across expanding domestic markets, including in healthcare, media,

e-commerce, banking, insurance and finance, hospitality, organised retail, real estate, and the platform economy (Cayla and Bhatnagar 2017; Nayyar 2012; Singh and Jaykumar 2019; Williams et al. 2017, etc.). The growth in domestic new services in India has changed the ways in which work, employment and labour are perceived and organised, 'informed by greater levels of digitalisation, growing international influence, private investment, and individualised aspirations' (Williams et al. 2017, 1269). It has also, in effect, transformed what kinds of skills are sought, valued and rewarded by employers and workers in the new economy (Singh and Jaykumar 2019).

Following from this, studies have identified professionalism as one of the core themes for understanding the lived experiences of new services workers in contemporary India (see eg D'Cruz and Noronha 2006, 2009; McGuire 2013; Vaidyanathan 2012). Broadly put, notions of professionalism in modern services relate to 'corporate-western' codes and practices that have gradually seeped into contemporary workplaces and now govern workers' identities, their experiences and their relationships with customers, clients and colleagues (see Boussebaa and Brown 2016). These codes of professionalism commonly index workers' ability to speak, dress, look, act and behave in ways that emulate the 'corporate Anglosphere' (Boussebaa, Sinha, and Gabriel 2014; Boussebaa and Brown 2016). Instead of emphasising purely cognitive or knowledge-based competencies considered central to conventional notions of professionalism, contemporary discourses have come to associate professionalism greatly with 'soft skills' that relate to identity management, ie the ability of workers to manipulate and transform their linguistic, behavioural and bodily practices to respond to the social, aesthetic and emotional demands of fast-paced, cosmopolitan servicescapes (see Bitner 1992; D'Cruz and Noronha 2006, 2009; Kikon and Karlsson 2020; Raman and Koka 2015; Singh and Jaykumar 2019).

Such is the demand for soft skills trainings among young people in India today that numerous small and large public and private sector institutions and agencies have mushroomed across different cities, becoming key intermediaries shaping young job entrants' experiences and expectations of the labour market. More generally, the new discourses of professionalism have found widespread recognition and acceptance amongst the central and state governments in India, desperately looking to address concerns around employment and employability among young people and graduates (see Kumar 2017; Kumar and Velusamy 2017).

Existing research exploring notions of professionalism and soft skills development in contemporary India has thus far focussed primarily on the globalised information technology (IT) and IT enabled services (ITeS) sectors and their employee groups, including software professionals, call centre and back-office agents serving in multinational and transnational corporations (Boussebaa, Sinha, and Gabriel 2014; D'Cruz and Noronha 2006, 2009; Raman and Koka 2015). Only recently have studies begun to put more emphasis on notions of professionalism at the margins of India's global IT and IT-services chains, among those serving its rapidly expanding 'domestic' services economy (see eg Cayla and Bhatnagar 2017; Kikon and Karlsson 2020; Mirchandani, Mukherjee, and Tambe 2016). Kumar's study (2016), located in Mumbai's well-known 'IT parks' that house influential multinational corporations, further highlights the difference between the two emergent subsets of India new service workers. The first subset comprises the well-paid 'global knowledge professionals', who operate inside the core business domains of global transnational corporations. These are key actors in post-liberalisation India, given their perceived leading role as both producers and consumers (see Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009). The second set of new services workers, however,

belong to the more marginalised – even servile – underclasses, working in these same IT parks. These include, among others, subcontracted workers who are employed in large numbers by private agencies to provide various support services such as routine frontline office-based desk work, housekeeping, cleaning, security and transport (see Gooptu 2013a; Mirchandani, Mukherjee, and Tambe 2016; Ray 2020). These workers operate at even lower pay, in more precarious roles, and often remain hidden in major discussions on economic and social upgrading in global value chains (see Munck 2013; Pattenden 2016). While much remains to be understood about these marginalised workers in the India's new services, it is important to note that more of them are increasingly being made subject to similar corporate-western regimes and standards of professionalism that place identity-related soft skills as central to professional inclusion and advancement in the modern neoliberal economy (Raman and Koka 2015; Singh and Jaykumar 2019) (Figure 1).

Notions of professionalism in India's urban new services demand greater acceptance and adoption by individuals of a number of favourable cognitive and corporeal dispositions, related to: (1) Englishised linguistic conventions in everyday practices; (2) cosmopolitan workplace cultures, including modes of dressing and appearances; (3) flexible work-timings and shifts aligned with domestic and global mobility of/for work; and (4) adherence to neo-Taylorist management principles and systems of organisational control and discipline. Today, both national and international corporations with service operations invest significantly in pre-and-post recruitment trainings to identify and enhance these 'soft skills' among their employees, under the guise of professionalism. Noticeably, cognitive and corporeal dimensions appear to become more coercive as one 'travels down' the corporate hierarchy: starting from managerial and executive employees in multinational corporations to ancillary domestic-facing services workers to support staff such as housekeepers, drivers and security guards (see Gooptu 2013a; Mirchandani, Mukherjee, and Tambe 2016; Vijayakumar 2013). Professionalism, in this sense, is not merely an abstract marketing ploy or a 'branding strategy' (Ashcraft et al. 2012) of businesses; rather, in its everyday manifestation, it operates as an effective 'software of control' (Fournier 1999) that shapes the lives, experiences and subjectivities of new services workers. It is not a surprise, then, that these expanded notions of professionalism have been viewed by critical management and organisational scholars as discursive corporate ideological apparatuses designed to discipline workers and align them to specific organisational service standards, objectives and cultures (see Nath 2011, Poster 2007; Shome 2006; Vaidyanathan 2012). This position also echoes earlier studies undertaken

> Professionalism
> Pragmatism
> Team Spirit
> Integrity
> Innovation

Values
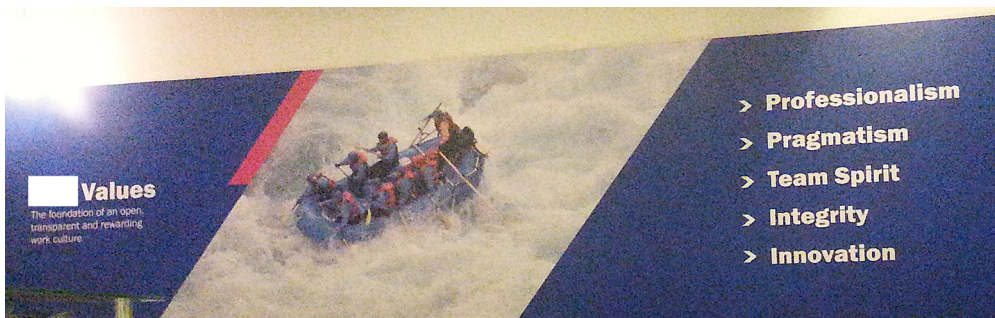The foundation of an open, transparent and rewarding work culture

Figure 1. Billboard outside a domestic call centre claiming professionalism as a core value (Source: Author's photo).

in western contexts, which have highlighted the disciplinary-ideological function and top-down nature of professionalism in contemporary services workplaces (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Evetts 2011).

Echoing critical organisational literature on professionalism, recent studies on sociology of work, employment and labour in India also conceptualise professionalism as being imposed 'from above' by the neoliberal state, private multinational corporations and new labour market intermediaries (D'Cruz and Noronha 2009; Gooptu 2013b). While useful in understanding corporatised professionalism as both discourse and ideology, there has emerged a tendency in this literature to ascribe to it an all-encompassing characteristic, whereby workers remain passive receivers, with little agency in shaping or challenging it. In reality, however, notions of professionalism are wide-ranging and represent the combined practice of worker identity formation that is not always without tensions and tribulations. Indeed, when faced with these 'new' notions of professionalism, workers do not just simply accept, adopt or reproduce them. Rather, these notions go through a crucial phase of re-interpretation, re-configuration and coping, that impacts workers' overall work-lives and sense of self (see Dall'Alba 2009; Steinberg 1990; Vaidyanathan 2012).

Often service workers not only endure but actively contend with the process of 'habitus disjunctures' (Reay 2004) – a sense of conflict between their own pre-existing social and spatial identities and the ones they are supposed to 'put on' in the workplace (see Mirchandani 2012). This is perhaps evident most clearly in the case of transnational call centres in India and the wider Global South, where workers change their accents, identities and personalities at work (see Krishnamurthy 2018, Mirchandani 2012; Nadeem 2009, etc.). A study by Cayla and Bhatnagar (2017) also instantiates a similar process of identity manipulation, through examples of individual workers engaged as 'baristas' and 'gym trainers' in India's domestic-facing services economy. They show that whereas said roles have existed historically in India, in traditional tea-stalls and in 'akharas' (traditional Indian gyms), they have transformed radically in the context of the new services economy, propelling a different kind of service culture set up around urban cosmopolitan consumption. Youth from relatively marginalised backgrounds who assume frontline roles in these new servicescapes risk being viewed as 'unprofessional' or 'less than', if they fail to communicate with the Englishised language conventions geared towards urban middle classes and elites in such spaces. Consequently, to safeguard their professional status, these workers develop their own versions of an 'expert language' over time, a valued skill that reinforces their agency and sense of professionalism. Studies such as these provide important insights about new services workers' experiences in India and reveal the discourse of professionalism as deeply entwined with soft skills that are themselves inscribed within specific linguistic, cultural and classed boundaries that unravel and are re-made during routine social interactions (see also Kikon and Karlsson 2020; Vira and James 2012; Williams et al. 2017).

Crucially, the above accounts underscore the 'social construction of professionalism' in the context of India's emergent new services economy that combines an understanding of job- and role-based demands on workers' identities and local lived realties, alongside everyday social experiences of power and agency (see Evetts 2003; Steinberg 1990). There remains ample scope to expand this grounded social constructivist view of professionalism beyond the domain of the workplace, and include spaces that workers inhabit before they even enter new services roles, for example urban skills development courses and programmes, run by public sector, private or hybrid actors and institutions and which continue to attract

a large number of young labour market entrants (see McGuire 2013; Nambiar 2013; and Datta, this issue). Attempting to serve as a timely addition to the growing strand of scholarship, this paper explores how contemporary notions of professionalism in India are transmitted, received and re-interpreted in the context of soft skills trainings. The paper makes apparent the contradictory dimensions of professionalism in contemporary new services economies that, on the one hand, aim to produce obedient subjects appropriately manifesting corporate neoliberal subjectivities, and, on the other hand, claim to equip under-confident individuals from marginalised social locations with specialised skills, promising to enhance their overall sense of self-worth and agency. Going beyond a purely top-down view of professionalism, the discussion also sheds light on trainees' own perspectives and experiences of professionalism and professional identity formation in the new services economy. The constructivist analysis reveals several gaps and cracks within ascribed and prescribed notions of professionalism that became apparent as trainees learn, question and (re-)interpret what they were taught in line with their own local social identities, experiences, and cultural values and belief systems. Briefly summarising the key arguments from the paper, the conclusion underlines the need to further explore the social construction of professionalism among marginalised working populations entering India's burgeoning new services economy by contextually unpacking the discourse of soft skills in relation to specific workers' positionalities and practice of agency.

Methodological considerations: exploring professional identities in India's new services

The analysis in this paper is drawn from an ethnographic case study that was carried out in Pune, a Tier-2 metropolitan centre and a new services employment hub in western India, as part of my doctoral research. The research, conducted over a period of 18 months, examined young peoples' experiences of work and professional identity construction in the new services economy in India, combining intensive qualitative interviews with immersive ethnographic techniques of 'deep hanging out' alongside young people in college campuses, workplaces, local skilling centres, placement consultancies, and recreational spaces like cafes and shopping malls in the city (Figure 2).

The skills centre I started visiting during this time was 'Pragati' (name changed). Pragati trained young people over the course of three months for varied customer-interactive new services roles in the city – including in call centres and back offices, as well as frontline retail and hospitality, especially in malls, fast-food restaurants and coffee chains like Starbucks, McDonalds, and Café Coffee Day. I had received permission from higher management of Pragati, which oversaw centres and programmes throughout different cities in India, to observe and participate in its Pune centre. This gave me relative freedom to operate as a researcher in the training centre, following due ethical considerations.

I started by documenting routine interactions among trainees (students) and trainers in the classroom. Here, I had the opportunity to introduce myself to the new batch as a research student from Delhi, enrolled at a university abroad, wanting to understand soft-skills training processes and learn about trainees' perspectives and aspirations beyond the training. I was able to establish good rapport with most trainees quickly, becoming part of their informal WhatsApp groups. A few weeks after joining, I was invited by the training centre staff, looking to offset their intense workloads, to conduct a few sessions as an unpaid voluntary trainer. This

Figure 2. Flyer advertising a skills development programme in Marathi, offering free training with assured job placements in Pune (Source: Author's photo).

involved delivering some content on 'improving general knowledge' and 'communication', with the freedom to combine this with my own experiences of life and education. Trainees were informed of this decision by both the centre management and me. By this time, I had become well acquainted with most of the trainees, and could hold a somewhat unique dual position

as a co-learner and a trainer. This gave me the opportunity to be both a participant observer and an observant participant (Moeran 2009) at the same time – offering greater insights into the different routines and processes of professional identity construction, and the lives of those wishing to engage with it.

At the beginning of the training programme, the batch comprised 15 trainees – eight young men and seven young women, mostly drawn from low-income areas around the centre itself (Table 1). Students recruited had to be a minimum 18 years of age, with at least a secondary school (10th grade) education. The batch I observed and interacted with comprised three trainees with secondary (10th grade) schooling, five who had finished senior secondary (12th grade) but were not enrolled in a college), and seven who were enrolled in a higher education institution. Importantly, except for three trainees, most were not educated in English-medium schools, and saw it as a distinct disadvantage for landing new services jobs. Finally, while several trainees claimed to have no previous experience of formal employment, seven trainees in the batch had some work experience, mainly in informal, part-time, and casual roles such as a daily-wage labourer, a courier, a shop/office assistant, etc. Two among them had a few months of previous experience in a domestic call centre role in Pune.

My association with the batch of trainees did not end in the classroom as my acquaintance with the group grew further through social media, including on WhatsApp and Facebook. Trainees invited me to birthday parties and other celebrations that were organised outside the training centre. This further helped alleviate, to a great extent, concerns around positionality involved in 'researching down' (Smith 2006) the trainer–trainee relationship and made the establishment of trust and information sharing more horizontal. I continued to keep in touch with several trainees after the training course had ended, having further conversations, and tracing their progression in work and life. However, for the purpose of

Table 1. Cohort profile at *Pragati* skills training centre.

Participant no.	Age	Sex	Educational level	Previous job roles (if mentioned)
1	19	Male	12th grade	–
2	21	Female	(Pursuing) undergraduate degree	Front desk help (at small business)
3	19	Male	12th grade	–
4	21	Female	(Pursuing) undergraduate degree	–
5	23	Female	10th grade	Attendant in hospital
6	18	Male	10th grade	–
7	21	Male	12th grade	Daily wage worker
8	19	Male	(Pursuing) undergraduate degree	–
9	20	Female	(Pursuing) undergraduate degree	–
10	22	Male	(Pursuing) undergraduate degree	Shop attendant, salesman
11	20	Male	(Pursuing) undergraduate degree	–
12	22	Female	10th grade	–
13	20	Female	Pursuing undergraduate	Domestic call centre agent
14	21	Female	12th grade	Admissions assistant (in local college), domestic call centre agent
15	19	Male	12th grade	Shop attendant

this paper, the analysis condenses my observations and reflections that related primarily to trainees' experiences at Pragati.

'Becoming professional': soft skills training at the urban margins

Pragati was one skills training centre among many in Pune that prepared young aspirants for roles in the domestic new services economy. The aim of the training sessions at Pragati was to produce new professionals, fit to serve in the rapidly growing, cosmopolitan services sector in the city. The emphasis was on preparing trainees for both frontline customer-facing *and* back-end roles in domestic call centres, retail stores, restaurants, new age coffee shops, and fast-food chains. The training took the form of an intense 50-day course that ran six days a week, from 9am to 6pm, with a one-hour lunch break. The main content of these training sessions was delivered through three key modules, namely: (1) English and Communications, (2) Basic Computer Training, (3) Life-Skills and Value Education (see Table 2). Importantly, even though much of the training material was printed in the English language, the language of instruction inside the classroom during trainings was the local vernacular – a mix of Marathi and Hindi. During the final week of the 50-day training period, trainees prepared exclusively for their job placement interviews that in most cases led to them gaining a new services role in the city.

Pragati, in many ways, served as a crucial intermediary between aspiring workers and local new (domestic) services employers with whom it had strong links. Pragati hosted three or four batches, of 15 to 20 trainees each, every year. I joined Pragati in April 2016, just as a new batch was about to start, to observe and document the trainings from inside the centre. The funding and operational support for the programme happened through a unique 'public–private partnership' (PPP) arrangement – Pragati was a non-governmental organisation (NGO), which received some financial help from a well-known Indian IT services firm's corporate social responsibility (CSR) budget, and was housed in a building provided free of charge by the local government.

Trainings at Pragati targeted youth from 'underprivileged' backgrounds and were conducted free of cost. This said, a variety of socio-economic factors played an important part in the inclusion or exclusion of specific individuals from being recruited into the programme. I witnessed as those responsible for recruitment of new trainees were informally instructed to 'screen-out' or exclude individuals from extremely low-income or poor backgrounds, vaguely defined by the centre manager as those having below two lacs (Indian National Rupees – INR) per annum family income. These individuals were deemed by trainers as not the ideal candidates, since they did not have the 'right type of social skills' which made them 'less-trainable' and 'less-stable' in employment. This initial screening process demonstrated that finer socio-economic differences continued to matter even at the margins of the new services labour market, placing youth from poorest sections as the most disadvantaged even if they had the qualifications and willingness (see eg

Table 2. Timetable for a typical day at Pragati skills training centre.

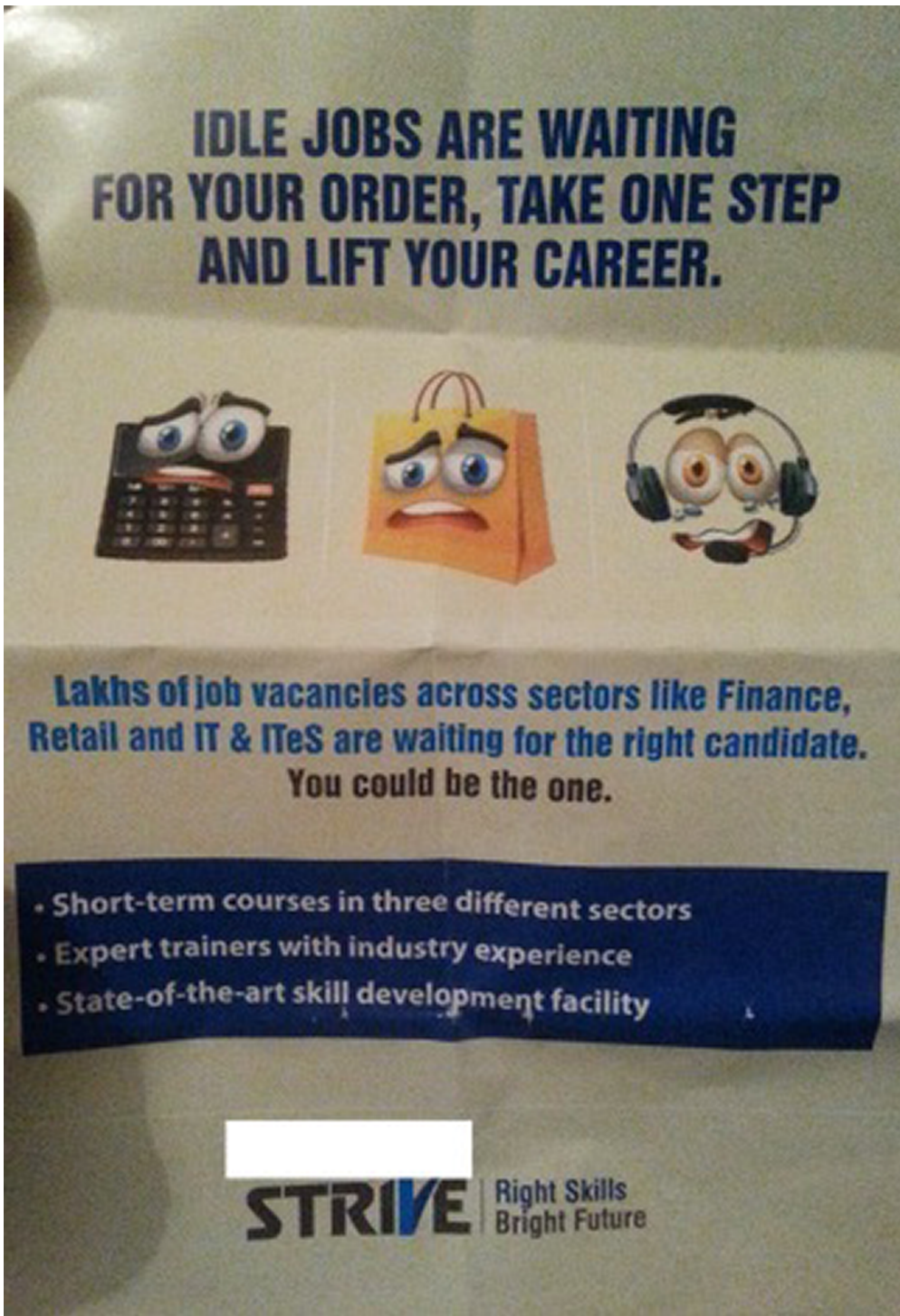| 9.00–9.30am	9.30–11.30am	11.30am–1.00pm	1.00–2.00pm	2.00–4.00pm	4.00–5.00pm	5.00–6.00pm
Morning assembly	English and communications	Computer skills training	Lunch break	English and communications	Life skills and value education	Computer skills training

Figure 3. Flyer advertising trainings for different jobs in finance, retail, Information Technology (IT) AND IT-enabled services (ITeS) sectors in Pune, India (Source: Author's Photo).

Upadhya and Roy Chowdhury, this issue; and Nambiar, this issue, who attest to this being a wider phenomenon in training recruitments in India). At the same time, the idea of professionalism imparted at centres such as Pragati appeared to be more basic and broad-based than has yet been documented in the bulk of literature focussing on India's exports-based IT and ITeS services (see D'Cruz and Noronha 2006, 2009; Raman and Koka 2015) (Figure 3).

In my interactions with them, most trainees expressed their expectations from the training programme at Pragati in terms of overcoming their overall lack of self-confidence and English language skills, which could keep them from succeeding in a fast-paced, modern cosmopolitan service workplace, that was the hallmark of well-known Indian and foreign multinational companies such as Wipro, TATA, Infosys or IBM. Centres like Pragati, in turn, had captured the attention of these youth by promising a rapid transformation (within just two months) and assuring a job placement at the end of the programme.

The overarching message from trainers to young trainees was to work hard to transform 'one's own self', through guided practices of self-monitoring, self-control and self-care. These were essential for constructing a new professional identity that could ultimately ensure upward social mobility to these young individuals from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds. As such, this sort of messaging resonated with similar findings in the wider literature on popular personality development programmes that view it as the gradual internalisation of the neoliberal logics of 'self-responsibilisation' and 'entrepreneurialism' (Gooptu 2009; McGuire 2013; Vijayakumar 2013; see also Keddie 2016), and/or as exploiting the perceived doubts in the self-image of young people entering the labour market. However, rather than viewing processes of neoliberal self-responsiblisation as all-encompassing, the following sections of this paper discuss the distinct ways in which notions of professionalism were transmitted and received during soft-skills training at Pragati, interrogating the localised agency of both trainers and trainees in this context. Each section centres on one of three thematic categories around which much of daily trainings in Pragati were organised, namely (1) 'routinisation'; (2) 'Englishisation'; and (3) 'levelling up'. Through a contextually grounded description and analysis of these categories, the discussion demonstrates how notions of professionalism were communicated by trainers, the different 'identity-based' demands they placed on the trainees, and how trainees received, questioned, and (re-)interpreted these demands, in line with their own local social identities, experiences, values and belief systems.

Routinisation: time discipline as professionalisation

Time discipline through routinisation of trainees' daily life and activities was one of the key aspects of professional training according to trainers at Pragati. A typical day at the training centre began with the 'morning assembly' and a roll call. According to the centre manager, the idea of conducting nine-hour trainings six days a week was to acquaint trainees with the intense psychosomatic rhythms and routines that they would encounter once employed in new service jobs and workplaces, and make them feel accountable. Consequently, trainees who arrived early for morning class were given special mention by trainers. In time, students were asked by trainers to check in on each other every morning through text messages on the class WhatsApp group, keep each other informed if when they were going to be late or miss training, and pass on the message to the trainer. I later came to know that once trainees

became familiar with each other, they formed an alternate WhatsApp group. This group was a place where trainees chatted with each other informally, and asked each other to make an excuse on their behalf in case they were running late or unable to attend training on a given day.

During lectures, time discipline was framed by trainers at Pragati as being the bedrock of professionalism. During one of the sessions, a trainer chose to present punctuality as an important virtue of a professional life. Inspired by western-corporate practice, it stood in contrast to the bureaucratic 'babu-culture' prevalent in government offices in India where employees were portrayed as being habitually late, disorganised and slow. A common joke amongst trainees related to the 'Indian Standard Time' (IST) – which was stereotypically associated with being regularly late for meetings and events. Trainers partook in and encouraged this kind of humour, as they saw it as another way of instilling professional values in trainees that matched the intense, fast-paced, customer-centric new services environments.

Other methods of teaching time discipline at Pragati, I noticed, reflected those that have also been documented in call centre trainings and personality development programmes in India (see Krishnamurthy 2018; McGuire 2013; Nadeem 2009). This was hardly surprising, since much of the teaching material at Pragati borrowed from those commonly in circulation across other urban skills training centres in India. Following this, I witnessed a usual mock scenario where each trainee was given a list of activities, events and tasks in a calendar diary, and was asked to categorise them as either 'personal' or 'professional'. Trainees then had to reschedule these events, tasks and activities based on their perceived personal and professional importance. Trainees at Pragati were encouraged to 'maintain a routine from the beginning of the programme and were cautioned that 'being professional' often involved sacrificing time in personal life and redirecting it towards work-related commitments. A few trainees took this exercise to mean that work *always* had greater importance than personal commitments, and was thus impractical or conflictual with real-life situations: 'But what if I have an exam on that day and can't make it to work?', questioned Shubham (name changed), who was still in the first year of university and wanted to work in a call centre, primarily to support their studies. In another case, a 21-year-old female trainee Romila (name changed), who was married and held major responsibilities of homecare, responded 'How can I say? The decision [of rescheduling of professional and personal tasks or events] will be up to my [parents-] in-laws'. Both responses suggested that re-prioritising of one's daily life, based on this perceived primacy of work, could not be accepted as a simple or even as a purely personal prerogative.

While trainers at Pragati made modifications to the training materials (such as the textbook and handbooks), tailoring them according to the needs and experiences of earlier batches, there remained clear gaps in making them relatable to/relevant for the current batch of trainees. This was evidenced, for instance, in the fact that trainers continued to work with the assumption that young trainees at Pragati would hold a single-track occupational career, yet this was not something that most trainees themselves necessarily aspired to. Hailing from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds, several trainees wanted to enter new services jobs while still pursuing education and/or tasked with major care-work responsibilities. Trainees expressed that they wanted to retain the 'freedom to take up another job' in Pune's (formal or informal) economy if they saw it as more convenient or lucrative. Indeed, a few trainees had already started to explore opportunities in the emerging digital

apps-based gig economy in the city, looking to take up work as couriers or delivery drivers with platform companies such as Ola and Zomato. Ultimately, trainees wanted to maximise their earning potential and support their families in the short run, so the idea of devoting most of their time to planning and prioritising one job over others was something that did not instantly resonate with them.

While many such exercises of routinisation and time discipline at Pragati could be inter-preted as paternalistic, aimed at encouraging social control and obedience (to a specific kind of authority) among young job aspirants (see Gooptu 2009, 2013a), many trainees did not express total scepticism towards them. Indeed, several trainees mentioned that practical awareness and organisation of one's routine was ultimately helpful in enhancing their capac-ities to self-manage their lives and relationships at home as well. Such explanations indicated pragmatism and relationality, that was based as much as on a sense of opportunism as on adherence to local familial and gendered cultural norms.

Englishisation: language management as professionalism

Another key aspect of professionalism promoted at the training centre was the use of English language in daily communication among trainees. Pointing to the fact that domestic-facing call centres or other customer-interactive positions in which trainees would eventually be placed did not demand fluency in English, the purpose of the training in Pragati was never to impart advanced English language skills or undertake voice and accent training, as is common practice in international call centre trainings and language training courses that prepare workers for transnational services sector jobs such as in international call centres (Boussebaa, Sinha, and Gabriel 2014; D'Cruz and Noronha 2009; Das, Dharwadkar, and Brandes 2008). Rather, given that *most* trainees came into the centre with minimal training, educational exposure and socialisation in English, the aim was to make them feel more familiar with basics of the language and develop their confidence and the habit of using 'English words, terms, and phrases in everyday contexts'. While the course material used by trainers was primarily in the English language, the language of instruction inside classroom for all practical purposes was a mix of Marathi, Hindi, and some English. Trainers translated the course material for trainees into Hindi or Marathi verbally, who in turn continued to communicate, ask questions, and clarify doubts in these languages.

Overall, trainees at Pragati appeared to enjoy the different methods of English language learning provided at the centre, as this was one area where they felt especially deficient. As mentioned earlier, except for three trainees (out of 15), most were not educated in English-medium schools. English remains a key marker of status and mobility in the labour market in urban India, not just for elite but increasingly also for 'low-end' service work (Grover 2018). For trainees, the promise of improving their 'spoken English' was therefore one of the most valuable aspects of the training. An improved understanding and grasp of English were perceived by them as essential from a professional standpoint, since they saw themselves working in Englishised urban cosmopolitan spaces in the future, that were more reflective of urban upper-middle class and elite consumption influence (see Cayla and Bhatnagar 2017). A connected *personal* aspirational dimension of English language learning among trainees related to gaining more confidence, as consumers and as creators and influencers themselves, whether in the city or on various online social media platforms such as Instagram,

Facebook and Snapchat. Sunny (name changed), a 19-year-old trainee, mentioned how various shopping malls in Pune were spaces where his friends went dressed up in fashionable clothes, ate at fast-food joints, and practised English, updating their social media profiles with new photos, videos and hashtags. For young trainees, 'online' and 'offline' spaces were equally significant, and proficiency in English provided them mobility and status in both.

At Pragati, trainees found English language classes to be informative when they did not follow bookish learning of grammatical rules and syntax. Recognising the lack of formal English training amongst many trainees from lower middle- and working-class backgrounds, trainers experimented with different strategies of English language learning. Whereas trainers occasionally taught through English textbooks such as *Wren's New Elementary Grammar on Modern Lines* (commonly used at the 6th grade level in English-medium schools for teaching grammar and sentence construction), most language and communication learning was designed in the form of situational, observational, and conversational activities for which trainers used customised instruction material. Trainers used visual aids to motivate trainees to instil a habit of 'picking up' English on their own. Once a week, students got to watch an English-language film – a fun comedy, serious period drama, or spiritual or patriotic film. Trainees could recommend English language films ahead of time, provided they fell into one of the 'acceptable categories', and then vote on them to be selected. The motive, according to trainers, was to make English learning fun but also 'values-oriented'.

Notwithstanding the emphasis on activity-based learning at Pragati, methods of English language teaching still relied heavily on emulation, memorisation, and repetition. During a few English lessons, trainees were instructed to think of themselves as service agents and respond to common questions from customers, following tracts from a textbook. The trainer would ask trainees to repeat the question and answers verbally in English, copying his mannerisms, pronunciation, and diction. Trainees would become very animated as they copied the trainer, who read out the questions and answers several times over, each time in a different tone and pitch. Although the trainer would occasionally translate sentences into Marathi and Hindi, they did not do this for each sentence, which was confusing to trainees as they had difficulty not only in comprehending what was being spoken but also in understanding the context in which the conversation was taking place. Trainers insisted that this was a useful 'short-cut way' of improving spoken English and that translating each sentence was of little importance. However, many trainees saw these activities to be of little help in preparing them for real-life situations, whether for job interviews or roles in call centres where they would be faced with 'customers with high level of English'. Ultimately, these language learning activities mainly relied on memorisation and rote learning, something trainees had encountered previously in their schools, but which had little inherent value. Even if 'funny and engaging', these activities revealed another point of disconnect between trainers' pedagogical methods and trainees' own expectations.

'Levelling up': impressions management as professionalism

As previously mentioned, an important aspect of professionalism that was considered fundamental by trainers related to altering trainees' management of their appearance and attitudes by making both external and internal modifications. The objective was to aid in the cultivation of a positive, empathetic and relatable identity among trainees, with which they could 'impress' customers, colleagues and clients, and meet the pressures of a fast-paced

corporate work environment. This emphasis on identity manipulation has been documented in the literature on new services as 'impressions management' (Alvesson 1994) or 'authenticity work' (Mirchandani 2012). Both ideas centre the worker identity transformation as being an essential part of new services roles, mandated and imposed on workers by firms 'from above' (see Alvesson and Willmott 2002). At Pragati, I found these ideas of identity manipulation to be further inflected by trainers and trainees' own experiences, as well as by values and belief systems that framed local practice.

Trainees were informed that an effective method of building a professional image was to mimic the mannerisms of successful people. This could include mimicking senior staff and bosses within the workplace, but also community or political leaders outside. Trainers and trainees alike used the word 'level' colloquially to frame the ideas associated with being professional. Building up one's professional image was referred to as *Level Uthana* or 'levelling up'. This was interpreted by trainees as markedly improving one's speech, communication style, body language, emotions and mannerisms and matching those whom they admired or those whom they aspired to be. A few trainees expressed scepticism to taught ideas of levelling up, expressing that while it was good to have an accomplished role model to emulate, understanding the context in which their success was achieved was equally important. As one trainee put it:

> All these different ways of speaking, behaving, I think what Sir is telling [describing], it is not easy [to follow], everyone's 'level' is different. You must see people first … to know what kind of person they are, and then copy them. You cannot just become Ambani [one of India's wealthiest industrialists] overnight, just by copying how they look or talk.

Trainers at Pragati, who had previously worked in roles within domestic and international call centres, were viewed as already having a (high) 'level' of professionalism. Interestingly, these trainers warned trainees against the unadulterated embracing of international call centre identity – emphasising that western ideas of professionalism found in international call centres also carried with them the risk of pollution of Indian cultural values and beliefs. Using the example of night work in international call centres, one trainer differentiated between 'bad influences' of western culture that promoted wasteful attitudes and over-indulgent lifestyles, alcoholism, cigarette smoking, and promiscuity – emphasising that their own approach to professional life hinged on respect for Indian family values and traditions, which included practising temperance and rejection of various forms of addiction.

The emphasis on following the Indian cultural tradition of respect was further reflected in class as trainees frequently used the prefixes 'Sir' or 'Madam' before the names of trainers, both when talking to them and when talking about them. This practice was never questioned or discouraged by trainers at Pragati, as it was associated as being consistent with unified 'Indian cultural values' of respect based on age and seniority in profession. Trainers made clear that trainings in Pragati were different from trainings popular in western-facing international call centres where, for instance, workers are actively dissuaded from using 'Sir and Madam' excessively during their interactions with customers overseas but also in their own workplace (see Aneesh 2012, 523). This message from trainers referenced a version of Indian cultural values associated with being respectful as a service provider, practising the right kind of emotional labour and avoiding conflict. Indeed, trainers encouraged the notion that

the more polite and reverential trainees were to prospective colleagues, customers and bosses, the more likely they would be able to 'win them over' and 'solve problems quickly'. While the messaging around national cultural values appeared, in this instance, to be encouraging servility in service and through it the reproduction of social class and caste hierarchies (Gooptu 2013a), the lessons itself were viewed by several trainees as useful in navigating tricky customer-oriented scenarios in new services work while also distinguishing themselves and their value systems from those that were prevalent in western international call centre cultures. The cautiously optimistic attitudes of trainees resonated strongly with findings from research conducted with 'non-elite' women working in a rural business process outsourcing centre in Karnataka, who employed a similar language of 'neoliberal self-improvement' (Vijayakumar 2013, 777), distinguishing their own unique identities by flexibly endorsing or denouncing specific national traditions and practices, in relation to other corporate-western cultural values and practices.

A complementary method of transforming trainees' attitudes and behaviours at Pragati was to socialise trainees into the new 'life-worlds' of modern workplaces. Trainees noted, for instance, the freer intermixing of men and women that happened in new services workplaces such as retail mall spaces and call centres, in contrast to the more segregated gendered spaces of their homes and neighbourhoods. Trainees also compared the new workplace cultures in spaces such as call centres and malls to that of a college, where young men and women met without restriction yet at the same time could retain as well as practise their beliefs and traditions. Trainees were taught modes of workplace behaviour through 'fun exercises' that also encouraged specific modes of male–female interactions. The trainings included a guest lecture on gender sensitivity in the new workplaces, evoking Indian cultural values and the heavily securitised narratives of 'naari samman' (respect for women) coupled with 'naari suraksha' (women's protection), specifically in the context of night work in call centres. These ideas were combined with other lessons that rather superficially taught etiquette such as being chivalrous, directing young men to 'hold the door for women' and 'letting women enter or exit first'. Very little, if any, discussion was had about sexual harassment policies and women's recourse to laws in new workplaces. Valuing lessons on workplace etiquette as important in enhancing self-confidence, many male trainees interpreted lectures on 'gendered sensitivity' to be informative, although less relevant in terms of learning professional practice.

Separate sessions on personal hygiene practices were also provided. Specific representations of physical appearance and personal grooming were instilled in trainees through group-based activities in the classroom that required them to draw posters of 'good daily habits' with visual references of men and women in office-formal attire. 'Dressing well' was also connected to ideas of instant recognition and to boosting trainees' self-worth and confidence. A trainer reinforced this belief through catchy phrases such as: 'Did you know, most people make a decision about others within the first thirty seconds of a two-minute interaction'; 'Your dress is your address', and 'First impression is the last impression'. Although formal dress codes were portrayed as a norm, experimentations with one's appearances, such as a new haircut or a trendy pair of glasses, were acknowledge and appreciated by the trainers. There were limits to experimentations as well where they were perceived to conflict with local cultural and gendered norms. For instance, the training material used for lessons on professional image building mentioned that 'wearing tight or revealing clothing for

women at the workplace was inappropriate and unprofessional' as it 'made others feel uncomfortable'. The opinions of trainees on this were more diverse. While some held the view that modern dress codes were a reality in new services jobs even in smaller cities like Pune, others took exception and distanced themselves from these influences of western culture which allowed for casual skirts and ripped jeans to be worn in office spaces.

Another connected discussion on 'levelling up' revealed how trainers implicitly sought to (re-)frame professionalism through its contradictory relationship with trainees' own local spatial identities. In a session on enhancing interview skills, a trainer, pointing towards me, spoke about youth from large metropolitans like Delhi as being 'unfazed', 'ready to speak up' and 'confident' in both social and professional situations, while Pune's youth were usually 'shy', 'reserved' and 'less confident'. This very intentional characterisation of me by the trainer was ultimately meant as encouragement for trainees, but also projected a simplistic gener-alisation of youth from both large and small cities. This notion of 'big-city swagger', however, also came to be contested by trainees themselves. In the discussion following the lecture, some trainees pushed back against the notion of small city youth as 'less than professional' based on their outward demeanour, asserting that 'Punekars' (those from Pune) had import-ant qualities – that they were 'hardworking, friendly, and respectful of others' and were also proud of 'Marathi culture'. In a bid to assuage the trainees, the trainer sought to balance this discussion, mentioning how it was *also* important to find inspiration 'from within' and to learn from one's immediate environment.

Such routine in-class interactions provided further evidence of peculiarities of professional pedagogies in soft skills training that claim to be sensitive to local social, demographic and cultural 'differences' among individuals (see McDowell 2015), yet seek to reify these differences in favour of corporate-ideological demands of identity manipulation. These interactions also underlined the tensions that were already visible or often emerged between taught, per-ceived and applied notions of professionalism as soft skills. Overall, trainees as young aspi-rational job seekers appeared to hold these tensions in tandem, describing specific aspects as irrelevant, insensitive or restrictive, while viewing others as invitations to explore, learn and experiment, individually and collectively, with new cosmopolitan life-worlds.

Conclusion: the social construction of professionalism in India's new services

India's liberalisation-era economic transition has seen the emergence of new forms of urban services work and labour that are increasingly informed by privatisation, internationalisation and digitalisation, and, consequently, by 'new' notions of professionalism. These notions reference specific soft skills that place expectations on workers to transform their identities radically and adopt specific corporatised behavioural, linguistic and corporeal codes and standards. As this paper has documented, these notions of professionalism have percolated further into India's domestic-facing urban new services as well. Here, youth entering the labour market from more marginalised social locations undergo intense trainings to enhance their self-confidence and transform their identities, to become familiar with and perform within modern fast-paced, cosmopolitan servicescapes that are geared towards the con-sumption idiosyncrasies of the urban elites, the middle classes and the nouveau riche. Consequently, literature on professionalism in India's new services has begun to highlight its corporate-ideological, class(ed), gendered and racialised dimensions, emphasising 'how

experiences of serving and processes of training to become servers in neoliberal India is founded on a relation of control, power, and the market' (Kikon and Karlsson 2020, 273). While findings in this paper reveal similar patterns of paternalistic, disciplinary-neoliberal ideological dimensions of soft-skills trainings through 'routinisation', 'Englishisation' and 'levelling up', they also expose the various gaps and cracks in the popular discourse of professionalism that emerge as youth from marginalised social locations come to terms with the differential identity demands that are placed on them from above.

This article crucially illustrates how instead of completely yielding to or rejecting corporate-ideological demands of professionalism, trainees weigh these selectively against what they consider and believe to be acceptable, appropriate or practical. The subsequent analysis of training interactions lays bare the social construction of professionalism – its constant making and unmaking – through a combination of local lived experiences, aspirations, cultural values and belief systems of those who teach, transmit, learn and embody it. Ultimately, the paper invites further explorations and reflections on notions of professionalism and marginality in the emergent urban new services economy, in India and the wider Global South, that include a deeper contextual engagement with workers' positionality, especially with gender, race and caste, as well as substantive examples of coping and resistance.

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