



Deconstructing Educational Barriers & Career Paths in the South Asian Context

Ankit Arun

ABSTRACT

Education systems in South Asia are widely recognized for producing academic talent, yet systemic barriers continue to limit students' career opportunities, particularly in rural and underprivileged communities. This paper explores the structural, cultural, and informational factors that direct students toward traditional engineering, medical, and technology fields while leaving alternative career pathways largely inaccessible. It examines the role of infrastructure disparities, overburdened teachers, familial pressure, and the absence of career counseling in reinforcing this pattern. Original survey data and findings from the Beyond The Usual Path (BTUP) career awareness workshops are presented, demonstrating that targeted community-based interventions can produce meaningful shifts in students' awareness and confidence. The findings suggest that while policy reform is necessary for sustainable long-term change, the informational gap driving career limitation is reversible, and bringing attention to this issue is a meaningful place to start.

Keywords: career awareness, South Asian education, community intervention, unequal opportunity, field research

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Education systems in South Asia facilitate international talent and skill, and foster growth in a large, diverse population. However, these systems face significant challenges that hinder the potential of students, primarily those from underprivileged backgrounds. To understand these challenges and their broad implications, a closer examination of the education landscape in this region must be conducted.

South Asian schools commonly follow a standard three-tiered school system, consisting of primary, secondary, and higher education. The system is comparable to the rest of the world, where primary and secondary schooling focus on fundamental core subjects in preparation for college and higher studies. The majority of schools fall under either government or private ownership; however, the resource and infrastructural gap between these institutions is highly significant in terms of enabling students' learning and will be discussed in detail later in this literature review.

These education systems are highly exam-oriented; access to higher education is dependent on exams, grades, and other scores. Unlike many Western and European education systems, extracurriculars and "passion projects" are hardly given merit or weight, and as a result, cause very few students to pursue them. Students, parents, and schools prioritize content memorization and information cramming, as they prove directly responsible for improved scoring and academic success as a result. Consequently, this intense focus on classroom grades leaves little room for the cultivation of character development, creativity, and critical thinking skills, all of which are necessary to thrive in the competitive workforce. This outlines the first of many issues faced by South Asian education systems, including disparities in resources and infrastructure, varying teacher quality, insufficient mental health support, lack of individualized student support, and limited career opportunities.

As previously highlighted, disparities between public and private education institutions are highly significant in fostering students' learning. Privately owned schools harbor considerable attendance costs but compensate with high-quality, often state-of-the-art facilities and resources. As one private engineering college student (7) mentioned, the facilities at their institution are comparable to those at the top Western schools. This ranges from simple technologies, like freely accessible Wi-Fi and computer labs, to more advanced research and lab equipment. While this level of resources is available at the top private universities in South Asia, it does not hold for smaller colleges. For an equal comparison of public and private college infrastructure, location must be taken into consideration.

An interview with two college students studying in rural Thiruvapur, India, provided insight into the stark contrast between the two types of institutions. One of the students (8), studying in a private college, describes having high-quality instruction, excellent facilities, digital learning, and a knowledge-enhancing environment, with the only significant struggle being difficulties in transitioning from the native language to English. In contrast, the second student (9), studying in a government-owned college, describes an atmosphere lacking even a relatable level of resources and support. For starters, their institution has no labs or computer stations, and existing facilities, even essentials such as restrooms, are poorly maintained. Left with no alternative, students are forced to petition or protest for better resources, but are threatened by the administration if they do so.

School funding and ownership heavily influence the issue of teaching quality. The public college, constrained by limited resources, is subject to holding underpaid, overburdened

teachers, which significantly hinders students' learning. One medical college student (5) states that, without proper incentive, many of their instructors read straight from PowerPoint slides or pre-made lessons without properly engaging with and teaching their classes, which causes many of her peers to fall behind. Furthermore, teaching is often conducted for only a small portion of class time, resulting in valuable time wasted, during which, for example, students could be helping with familial responsibilities. This problem is not directly a result of the educator's desire to teach; however, a public school instructor (1) explains how they are pressured with multiple additional tasks to teaching, such as maintaining academic records, administering first aid, and often managing other teachers' classes in case of their absence, as there are no substitute or assistant teachers. These challenges are faced by even the most skilled teachers, but a lack of professional development and proper teacher training programs results in a considerable number of underqualified instructors. Students describe many instructors coming to class unprepared or unable to meet the diverse needs of their students.

This inability of institutions to provide students with individual support and attend to their needs is another systemic issue in itself. A vast number of South Asian schools have little to no structured support for struggling students, with teachers following rigid curricula that involve little personalized teaching. Students dealing with medical or family issues, thus missing class time, are often left on their own to make up for lost time. Firsthand teacher accounts (1) explain that pressure and limitations placed upon teachers can be partially responsible for this, as they tend to be overworked and unable to provide extra support hours to students. On the occasion that help sessions are hosted, large groups are the norm, and students are rarely offered personalized help. This situation applies to higher-level and private education as well; a college student (3) explains that students who miss examination days are hardly ever granted flexibility, even in the most dire circumstances, and must repeat the entire year as a result.

Students with lost class time still can make up for it, but the same cannot be said for those with disabilities or special educational needs. Very few local and government education systems provide adequate accommodations for students, as mentioned by one teacher (1). Due to the lack of funding for these schools, there is no additional support provided for ADHD, dyslexia, or other learning conditions. Without proper resources, students with special needs are at risk of falling behind academically, creating a significant barrier to their overall development.

Another support-based challenge for South Asian systems revolves around students' mental health and guidance counseling. As a result of the (previously mentioned) information memorization, exam-oriented merit, and education culture, students in this region tend to face high academic and competitive pressure, especially from parents. Furthermore, awareness and support to counter this are very limited, with many (1) (5) expressing that their schools do not have counselors or basic support programs. A lack of guidance counselors not only fails to support students mentally, but also in their futures. One teacher (6) expresses how their students look to them as an alternative for personal guidance, which further adds to the issue of teacher workload expressed earlier.

A majority of the challenges outlined so far derive from within South Asia's education systems, but the issue of limited career opportunities extends into a wider, more cultural scope. This region places a heavy emphasis on technology/engineering and medical professions, leaving little space for other career choices. Societal and familial expectations further reinforce this restriction on career choice, with students often being discouraged from pursuing non-traditional careers. In the scope of this paper, *non-traditional* refers to careers or areas outside of the main engineering, technology, or medicine fields in South Asia. Furthermore, a



lack of career guidance and insufficient exposure to real-world opportunities leave many students unsure about their options, ultimately restricting their ability to choose what they want to pursue. This systemic issue, as a whole, not only restricts personal liberties but also contributes to an unbalanced, overpopulated workforce. Given this widespread impact, the issue of students' limited career opportunities will be the focus of this paper, where the importance, underlying causes, and potential solutions will be examined in detail.

PROBLEM

The issue of limited career opportunities for students in South Asian education goes beyond restricting individual choice; it directly impacts their ability to fulfill their potential, as well as their quality of life and motivation. The tendency of South Asian families to prioritize traditional technology/engineering and medical studies forces their children into these fields, even if their skills or interests lie elsewhere. As a result, many students are prevented from fully developing their talent, which, in a high-stakes environment, limits long-term success and thus quality of life. The narrowing of possibilities creates intense pressure on many, who must put in more effort to not fall short in this atmosphere, often leading to a loss of energy and motivation.

This systematic lack of career diversity, upon closer examination, is made up of three deeper issues: minimal support and reward for non-traditional majors, societal and familial fear of risk or pressure, and lack of information and awareness for alternative career options.

Universities, colleges, and businesses invest heavily in traditional programs, as they yield the highest participation and profit, drastically minimizing support for other fields. A student (3) shared how their university's arts and humanities department lacked funding, which resulted in an outdated curriculum and limited resources for job placements. For students looking to explore non-traditional areas, opportunity is limited in options as well as financially, as scholarships and recognition tend to follow this disproportionate pattern of allocation. The consequences of this systematic bias are common, direct obstacles for them; one student (7) expressed the difficulty of securing internships or jobs with a non-technical degree, noting that employers primarily seek candidates with engineering or medical backgrounds. This illustrates how this issue is prevalent beyond educational resources as real-world impediments to success.

As previously mentioned, South Asian parents tend to follow a similar bias—or cultural stigma—discouraging exploration of alternative careers. This is driven primarily by the fear of risk, the perceived lack of stability in less structured, undersaturated industries. Many prefer to keep their children on a highly competitive, established path, with the view that hard work by itself will find success. A parent of two high schoolers in the region (4) describes conversations with other parents discussing discouragement of exploring newer or more innovative fields, such as Biochemistry, due to the lack of fallback support. They also quote cost as a key reason for this problem, as a large percentage of families are unable to afford to fail or restart in their education. This pressure, sometimes even forcefulness, by parents deters students from pursuing their interests.

The limited exposure resulting from these issues contributes to the third major cause of limited career opportunities: a lack of non-traditional career awareness. Many families are simply unaware of the feasibility or opportunities present in other pathways. In a rural setting, this is especially prominent due to reliance on word-of-mouth guidance and relatively limited exposure to the internet. A student (5) notes the absence of career assistance or counselors to guide students' futures, leading to a dependence on family or friends, who often also know little about traditional careers. With such minimal lack of information concerning career exploration, students are forced to choose the pathways prescribed to them, rather than being able to pursue fields that are in line with their skills or interests.

These combined factors—limited support, societal pressure, and a lack of awareness—create a systematic barrier restricting students' career choices. Addressing these causes is imperative to improving South Asian education systems.

FINDINGS

While existing research and firsthand accounts can provide an effective understanding of existing constraints on career diversity in South Asian schooling, a gap remains in evaluating the effectiveness of actual interventions to address challenges. Guidance within these systems is limited, uneven, and largely inaccessible, especially within the public and rural institutions previously mentioned. Any available guidance—like teachers, relatives, or peers—focuses disproportionately on the general engineering, medical, or technology pathways, reinforcing existing limitations rather than expanding choice. Digital career resources do exist, like career exploration sites, but they tend to be disconnected from individual students' realities, often adding little value in combating limited opportunities. As a result, many existing solutions fail to meaningfully address the social proof gap identified earlier in this paper.

To evaluate whether targeted intervention could pose as a solution to the challenges outlined, the student-led initiative Beyond The Usual Path (BTUP) conducted 10 career awareness workshops in rural South Asian schools. These sessions reached over 850 high school students and combined career discussion, exposure to opportunities, and interactive reflection. Pre- and Post-workshop surveys were administered to assess the initiative's impact in a quantitative manner, such as measuring changes in confidence levels, awareness, and willingness to explore alternative career options.

Before intervention, 61.45% of students reported being bound to traditional engineering, technology, or medical (E/T/M) careers. 70.94% of students were unable to name a single local role model successful in the non-E/T/M pathway, demonstrating evidence of a clear career restriction at baseline. Additionally, only 24.20% of students were able to identify at least one professional career outside these traditional fields.

Following the workshops, various measurable changes were observed. Average self-reported willingness (1-10) to explore non-E/T/M careers increased from 6.24 to 8.77, representing a 40.54% increase. Students' confidence in understanding how to explore potential careers and manage resources effectively increased by 34.40% (from 6.57 to 8.83). These numbers indicate a meaningful reduction in internalized pressure surrounding non-traditional choices, as well as an increase in students' independent thinking.

The most substantial change occurred in students' knowledge of alternative career options. The percentage of students able to correctly list at least one non-E/T/M career rose from 24.20% to 79.07%. Furthermore, the average number of these correctly identified careers increased by 50.35%, suggesting an overall improvement in students' career awareness.

These findings suggest the ability of even singular interventions like the BTUP workshops to bridge the informational gap that plays a role in limiting career diversity. Gains suggest that prior restrictions were less due to lack of ability or motivation, instead, because of informational and social barriers, which present this challenge as reversible. The results highlight the importance of direct, narrative-based exposure and support the conclusion that localized career awareness solutions can expand on students' futures.

The Beyond The Usual Path initiative serves as evidence that targeted, community-based projects can provide effective solutions to systemic constraints. The results validate the utility of BTUP as a scalable, low-cost intervention model capable of addressing information barriers and thus reducing the limitations on students' career opportunities in South Asia.



CONCLUSION

The constraints on career diversity in South Asian education systems stem from structural issues—disproportionate infrastructure, overburdened teachers, lack of student support services, and a cultural fixation on scores and grades—collectively reducing students' academic potential and discouraging career exploration. Families push students towards traditional engineering, medical, and technology fields in fear of risk, lack of precedent, and minimal institutional support. The statistic that over 70% of surveyed students were unable to name a local role model in non-traditional fields underscores that students aren't merely unwilling to explore their options; they instead only have a limited menu of what they believe is possible.

The Beyond The Usual Path workshops prove that this condition is reversible; across ten sessions reaching over 850 students, targeted exposure produced shifts in awareness, confidence, and willingness to explore, such as a 226% increase in students able to identify at least one non-E/T/M career. These results indicate that even low-cost interventions can play a meaningful role in closing the informational gap.

Ultimately, effective policy—including mandating career counseling in schools and increasing investment in non-traditional pathways—is necessary to sustain an effective system for students over time, but the results from this study indicate that the conversation itself is a meaningful starting point. The purpose of education is not merely to prepare students for the workforce as it is, but to equip them with the understanding to shape it. For students in rural South Asia, this process begins with learning that alternative options exist in the first place.



INTERVIEW REFERENCES (NUMBERED & ANONYMOUS)

1. Public Elementary/Middle School Math Teacher, Sirkazhi, TN. Personal interview, 2025.
2. Private Higher Secondary School Math Teacher, Chennai, TN. Personal interview, 2025.
3. College Student, Private Medical College, Chennai, TN. Personal interview, 2025.
4. Parent of two high school students, Chennai, TN. Personal interview, 2025.
5. High School Student, Public Boarding School, Thiruvavur, TN. Personal interview, 2025.
6. Teacher, Higher Secondary School, Chennai, TN. Personal interview, 2025.
7. College Student, Private Engineering College, TN. Personal interview, 2025.
8. College Student, Private College, Thiruvavur, TN. Personal interview, 2025.
9. College Student, Public College, Thiruvavur, TN. Personal interview, 2025.

Beyond The Usual Path. (n.d.). *Beyond The Usual Path*. Retrieved from
<https://ankitarun1.wixsite.com/beyondtup>