



Katy Highet\*

# English and ‘personality development’: the hyper-individualization and de-politicization of social mobility in India

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2023-0030>

Received March 2, 2023; accepted August 3, 2023

**Abstract:** In the last two decades, English learning in India has undergone noticeable and subtle transformations. Alongside the massive increase in coaching centres to cater for widespread demand, there has also emerged a tacit understanding that it is no longer enough to speak English to be socially mobile: students must also engage in a range of self-work, or ‘personality development’. In this article, I draw on ethnographic data from an NGO in Delhi that seeks to alleviate poverty through English and personality development training for disadvantaged youth. I show how discourses of personality development (re)produce and juxtapose particular understandings of the self that work to hyper-individualize and depoliticize the project of social mobility. Situating these discourses within the context of shifting political economic configurations in India, this paper demonstrates how these notions of ‘personality development’ both emerge from and obscure long-standing and newly-developing colonial, caste and class histories, and how they work to produce depoliticised subjectivities.

**Keywords:** India; English; personality development; caste; class

## 1 Introduction

Neha had joined the NGO as a student 3 years before I met her. Like many of her colleagues, she had impressed her teacher and, upon completing the year-long English training programme, she was encouraged to train as a facilitator. This was a common trajectory for many of the facilitators I met who, for the most part, had been educated in Hindi-medium schools and had turned to the NGO in the hopes of acquiring the tools that they perceived vital for self-development and financial security. Over the last 3 years, Neha told me, she had undergone somewhat of a

---

\*Corresponding author: **Katy Highet**, School of Education and Social Sciences, University of the West of Scotland, Paisley, UK, E-mail: [katy.highet@uws.ac.uk](mailto:katy.highet@uws.ac.uk). <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4706-0601>

Open Access. © 2023 the author(s), published by De Gruyter. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

transformation: “if I see that who I was before 3 years or even before 2 years, so today I found myself literally changed”.

I was introduced to Neha in 2022 by Samir, whom I had known since 2018. Samir had followed the same student-to-facilitator pipeline and now occupied a senior role. Although they were from different cohorts, I was struck by how similar Neha’s description of the effects of the NGO’s programme on her own self was to the account that Samir had offered me several years before. These narratives, which depict the English learning journey within the NGO through contrastive images of prior and post-NGO ‘selves’ who had undergone some sort of personal change (always, for the better), were frequent, and came from students and staff alike. It was implicit, too, in the NGO’s objective, which aims to better ‘prepare’ students to enter white-collar professions. In their promotional material, the NGO offers a theory of change which encompasses, in addition to English, what they call “personality development”. In the diagnosis of social inequality and social mobility implicit therein, students are identified as lacking certain values, qualities and traits that are perceived as vital to help them navigate the job market. Social mobility is understood as not only requiring English but also work on one’s “personality”; in other words, it is an exercise in learning to perform English Speakerhood (Highet and Del Percio 2021a). The role of the NGO, as they saw it, was thus to provide such tools to students who are otherwise unable to access them in their own educational trajectories, by offering a particular roadmap to success that anyone could – and, implicitly, *should*, follow.

Social mobility is, of course, not only a concern for the NGO. As term that appears widely in scholarship on the sociology of India (Osella and Osella 2000; Sharma 2019; Vaid 2018), it has formed a key part of the history of post-colonial nation-building. With the abolition of “untouchability” and the developmental, modernisation mindset of the newly independent government, ideals of progress and mobility began to gain traction (Deshpande 2011; Osella and Osella 2000), resulting in reservation systems for oppressed castes. More recently, with the implementation of neoliberal economic policies at the end of the 20th century which gave birth to India’s own version of enterprise culture (Gooptu 2013), alternative theorisations of social mobility have come to be hegemonic. Situated within this context, in this paper I interrogate the emergence of “personality development” as a response to questions of social mobility in order to locate the (conflicting) ideologies of selfhood that undergird such approaches, and to ask what the mobilisation of personality tells us about competing conceptualisations of social mobility. To do this, I look at how discourses of the essential versus the improvable self produce conflicting yet overlapping notions of personality as being (1) immutable or (2) as modifiable through self-work. Locating these discourses within shifting political-economic and ideological arrangements, I show how, while seemingly incompatible, they work in dialogue to legitimise the enterprise of social mobility through personal

development. This, I argue, has the consequence of hyper-individualising and depoliticising the project of social mobility by framing it in moralised contradistinction with other possible modes of political action and subjectification.

## 2 English, caste, class and social mobility

Scholarship on language-based employability initiatives around the world (Allan 2013; Codó and Garrido 2014; Flubacher et al. 2018; Van Hoof et al. 2020), has traced the resignification of language learning as a neoliberal technology of the self (Martín Rojo and Del Percio 2019), rooted in discourses of profit (Duchêne and Heller 2012), self-advancement and improvement. In what Park terms the “ideology of language as pure potential” (2021: 65), neoliberalism is rationalised and offers hope to marginalised people across the globe. In India, while the indexical linking between English and wealth, education and status dates back to the colonial era, this has been reinforced since the liberalisation of the economy in the 1990s, a moment in which “the Indian middle class was massified, diversified and fragmented, and earlier routes of social mobility were unsettled” (Mathew 2022: 5). Today, many turn to English not only for the ostensible employability and security it is said to provide but also – as the notion of personality development suggests – for the project of self-transformation that it has come to represent as part of the embodied performance of middle-classness (Hight 2022; Jayadeva 2018; LaDousa 2014; Mathew 2022).

While we can observe much continuity between contemporary politics of English in India and its colonial and class history (Fernandes 2006), its role has been subject to transformations tied to shifting conceptualisations of social mobility that have developed in response to and in interaction with competing logics, interests and agendas. Discussions of English as a tool for social mobility are rooted in particular philosophical, ideological and political theorisations of the nature of inequality, social hierarchies, and the ability of individuals and groups to move through and overcome them. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive account, in what follows I outline the shifting and competing framings of class and caste in order to ask what this tells us about how social mobility gets articulated within particular configurations. This, I argue, is integral to understanding how personality development through language learning emerges as a means to (ostensibly) alleviate poverty.

As Sarah Dickey writes, how caste and class have been studied, understood and talked about has shifted in tandem with academic, economic and political changes in India and globally (2016: 27). Talk of class came to the forefront in the wake of Independence (Dickey 2016) as India embarked upon a mission of economic development and modernization, during which time it was hoped that oppressive ‘traditional’ structures would eventually succumb to the modernising project

(Deliège 2011; Subramanian 2019). Casteism, it was believed, had no place in modern India, a renewed nation and site where social mobility ought to be possible (Deshpande 2011). This discursive stance towards modernity became legitimised as a defining feature of the middle-classes (Van Wessel 2011), and from this emerged a persistent belief among the middle classes of caste as a thing of the past. These discourses propelled resistance towards measures implemented by the government, such as the quota system which reserves spaces in the public and education sectors for marginalised caste groups. These have been recurrently controversial (anti-Mandal protests 1990; medical student protests 2006<sup>1</sup>), and this “politics of backlash against state policies” has worked to preserve the interests of the middle classes (Fernandes 2015: 237) and to affirm claims to meritocracy. Indeed, the 2006 demonstration saw protesters asserting that the reservation system “undercuts the principle of equality and is antithetical to merit” (Subramanian 2019: 286). As Upadhy writes, the merit argument is “a central plank of the ideology of the new middle class” (2011: 185) and is “based on a very partial conception of inequality in Indian society, in which caste is denied but class is in some sense valorised (albeit as a form of social differentiation that is open)” (p. 186). Indeed, as Fernandes argues, a key element of the construction of the middle classes is the ambiguous bordering of the group – an ambiguity that stems from “the promise of access and aspiration for new entrants even as it is mired in a politics of inequality and exclusion” (2006: 240).

There are consequences to this framing of middle-classness and, by extension, social mobility, a primary one being what Deshpande has referred to as “caste-blindness” (2013). Through this, the oppressive and enabling effects of caste on people’s lives, as well as how caste has shaped – and continues to shape – the boundaries and performances of class (Fernandes 2006) are obscured. Caste has been discursively relegated to “the non-modern realm of religion and “caste politics”, while aligning modernity to the caste-erasing market economy” (Mosse 2020: 1,225). This reframing of caste as “competing ethnic-like or cultural identities”, Mosse argues, overlooks how caste remains a fundamental organising component of the economy (2020: 1,228). In other words, problems of equality tend to get discursively located in particular ways: the issue of social mobility and inequality becomes a question of *class* (understood, as we will see, in very specific ways), and questions of caste come to be framed as issues of cultural diversity and identity, evacuated of hierarchy and power relations (Natrajan 2018).

This, of course, does not mean that caste has been eradicated. Caste relations continue to devastate and constrain the lives of those most oppressed by it and advance

---

1 In November 2022 the Supreme Court voted to uphold the 103rd Constitution Amendment Act to introduce a 10 % reservation for “economically weaker sections” from the so-called ‘upper’ castes. This controversial amendment has been contested by anti-caste activists as a violation of protective measures intended to support marginalised caste groups.

those who benefit. It remains a consequential social marker even when not directly articulated – what M. S. S. Pandian calls “caste by other means” (2002: 1,735). Scholarship has shown how caste continues to play a crucial role in schooling (Mathew 2022), higher education (Chandras 2021; Subramanian 2015), and the corporate sector (Jodhka and Newman 2007; Tierney et al. 2019). And yet, the overwhelming discourse is one of meritocracy, and those in favour of the aforementioned quota systems are seen by many as unnecessarily perpetuating caste given that, “as the process of development matures under the neo-liberal market regime, caste is bound to disappear on its own, provided it is allowed to be forgotten by political entrepreneurs of Indian democracy” (Jodhka 2015: 253). This meritocratic discourse creates a smokescreen of equality that justifies and cements the positions of the privileged, but it also becomes a moral stance and, as such, is “upheld as a republican ideal that is a necessary corrective to older hierarchies of status” (Subramanian 2015: 318).

These shifting, co-existing and competing framings of social inequality have particular consequences on how social mobility comes to be understood, who is responsible for it, and the extent to which it is possible. In (Brahminical) caste ideology (Dumont 1980; see Gupta 2004; Sharma 1994, for how this ideology is contested), social mobility is an impossibility, as one’s work and status are pre-ordained, inescapable. In the ideology of neoliberal meritocracy, even those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are promised success through hard work. It is here that we see the relevance of these political economic shifts for language training programmes that seek to uplift marginalised young adults, as it allows us to trace how the question of social inequality has mutated from state attempts to ensure the social advancement and betterment of marginalised communities, to poverty solutions in the form of training programmes where students become responsible for increasing their skillset and ‘improving’ their personality. In what follows, I show how these competing yet overlapping conceptualisations of social mobility work in dialogue to produce a moralised discourse of personality development that gains traction through its discursive juxtaposition with ‘un-modern’ ways of being and becoming a better self.

### 3 Ethnographic context

As an organisation that seeks to alleviate poverty by helping students acquire professional jobs, the NGO offers a good vantage point from which to explore questions of language and social mobility. With 100+ branches across North India, the NGO has enrolled more than 100,000 students on their programme. Over the course of a year, it offers students a combination of English, soft-skills, IT and personality development training, as well as careers counselling. The NGO sits within a larger landscape of coaching institutions (Datta 2022; McGuire 2013) that claim to provide the types of

training and cultural capital associated with elite schooling, widely acknowledged as unobtainable through ‘traditional’ classroom pedagogies such as rote (Mathew 2022). What distinguishes this NGO from the plethora of other centres is its status as a non-profit, free-of-cost service for all students. Due to this, the students it targets/attracts tend to be those who would not be able to afford other English and personality coaching programmes. As such, while the students in the branch where I conducted most of my observations were not a homogenous group, a great deal of them belonged to a caste officially categorised as Other Backward Class – a category reserved for those deemed by the government to be socially, economically and educationally “backward”.

While the initial fieldwork at the NGO took place from 2018 to 2019, I remained in contact with many members of staff and students, and in January 2022 I designed and began delivering a series of online workshops with staff in order to discuss the themes that arose from my research and reflect on what this might mean for the NGO’s practice. The workshops were conducted in 2 separate groups – one with management (senior trainers [Manav], curriculum designers [Priyansh], and career guidance counsellors [Karuna]); another with junior (Neha, Riva) and senior (Samir, Sanjay) facilitators, all but one of whom (Sanjay) had previously been students at the NGO. While informed by the original ethnographic fieldwork, the data in this paper is primarily taken from the workshops, in which we explicitly discussed the mission and responsibility of the NGO, and the nature of social change and social mobility in India.

## 4 Personality development and/through English

In the time since I left the NGO, I had begun to notice a shift in emphasis in their messaging on their website and social media. While it remained prominent, English had started to take up less space. Since 2018, the NGO has somewhat rebranded, with references to “English” in its straplines replaced by “employability”, shifting the emphasis onto the skilling or training of students’ characters. As Neha explained, teaching “human behaviour” as well as “skills” and “how to treat people” are an essential part of what the NGO does, despite what many think: “it’s just our tendency to think that English is everything, but it is not, actually”. This is not to say that English was no longer an integral element of the upskilling of these students – there was an undisputed acknowledgement that English was an essential part of employability. Yet, as was frequently repeated, English was only “30 % of what we do”. The initial emphasis on English, I was told, was partially strategic, a means to grab the attention of would-be students and encourage enrolment. But their shift in emphasis from English to employability also reflects, in Manav’s view, a certain maturity, as “we have evolved over a period of time”. The shift, according to Manav, is evidence of the growing expertise of the organisation over time, as they have come

to understand that the emphasis on English alone is insufficient for their stated goals of providing students with tools to enhance employability.

On the one hand, their increased scepticism of the “promise” of English is refreshing and could be understood as a response to the multiple critiques (perhaps, even, my own) that have been leveraged at the English Language Teaching industry and its peddling of narratives that proclaim English as the ultimate resource for social mobility. But the NGO’s shift also appears to be a pragmatic one that allows them to claim advanced expertise and a sharper diagnosis of – as well as solutions to – poverty. In a crowded market of language and skills training institutions, this expertise, bolstered by their affiliations to Ivy League institutions in the USA, allows the NGO to stake claims to credibility and legitimacy, to differentiate itself from other institutions, thereby increasing its possibilities of securing students and donations. As Priyansh told me, the NGO is widely appreciated by its students who prefer this “methodology” to that offered by other such coaching centres who ostensibly focus only on “English English English”.

This emphasis on skills is part of a much longer history embedded in the shifting political economic structures of India over the last few decades (see Srivastava 2022 for an overview). The skills discourse (Urciuoli 2008) is one that we have seen in education across the globe, as students are reimagined as entrepreneurial selves who engage in never-ending quests of moralised self-improvement through the acquisition of more and more skills (Allan 2013; Flubacher and Del Percio 2017). In India, in both paid coaching centres as well as free-of-cost programmes, there has been increasing emphasis placed on ‘personality development’ (McGuire 2013; Srivastava 2022). The term ‘personality’ as it is used in these educational and development contexts appears to cover a host of referents that include but also go beyond what the word may connote in psychology (i.e. as innate personality types) or more generally (i.e. what distinguishes an individual, or one’s characteristic patterns of behaviour and thought). In the NGO and beyond, ‘personality’ is stretched to cover what may elsewhere be considered skills, character, habits, or virtues: it comes to stand for the accumulation of cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977) and the performance of a range of middle-class ways of doing and being, from qualities such as politeness and confidence, to stances such as celebrating diversity, and moralised practices such as good hygiene, which are inculcated in the students through, for example, the establishment of politeness rituals in classroom interaction, the selection of media discussed and studied, or the many motivational posters and guidelines that adorn the walls (see Highet and Del Percio 2021a, b).

Importantly, as I have argued elsewhere (Highet and Del Percio 2021a), for those in the NGO, “personality” was understood as not only collocated with English but often also uniquely accessible *through* English: in the words of one trainer, “personality development is English”. What the focus on personality thus demonstrates is not a pivoting *away* from English but rather a tacit understanding that language

skills alone are insufficient for the performance of middle-classness. In this sense, while personality development is a slippery term, and undoubtedly a neoliberal exercise, it is also one that is imbued with figures of (un)desirable personhoods that have emerged from India's (post)colonial history.

This (English-speaking) personality has become a common selling point of coaching institutes across India. Students thus become not only bundles of skills (Urciuoli 2008) but bundles of personality. In this sense, what is referred to as "personality" may appear simply as a stretching or re-packaging of the skills discourse. However, as I will argue, this act of repackaging does important work as it starts to resignify, sometimes in contradictory ways, what personality refers to. That is, as a strategically deployable shifter (Urciuoli 2008), the term personality allows those who adopt it to demonstrate (dis)alignment with conflicting theorisations of the self (as improvable or even entirely changeable; as essential and immutable) which is both shaped through and shapes competing understandings of social inequality and social mobility. As I will demonstrate, this dynamic talk about personality and its attendant conceptualisations of the self emerges from the shifting political economy of India, and ongoing tensions over class, caste and the politics of social mobility.

## 5 The lingering figure of the essential self

In the workshops I ran with staff, I shared extracts (Figure 1) from an article published by Jodhka and Newman (2007) that explored discrimination in the private sector in India through a series of interviews with employers:

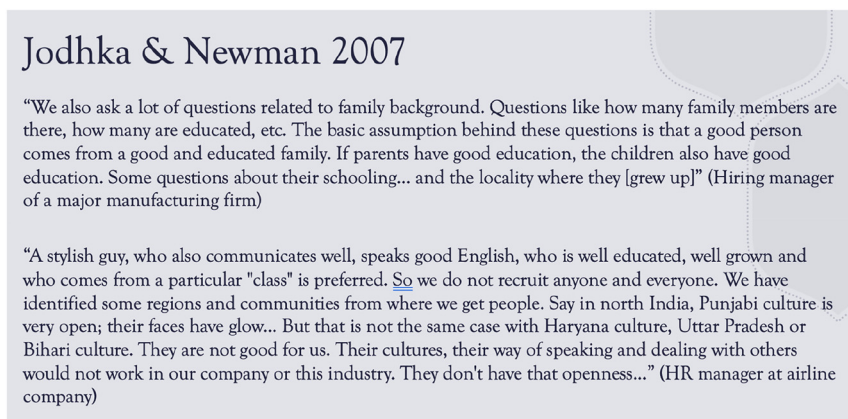


Figure 1: Workshop slide with extracts.



Reluctant to use my own verbatim data for ethical reasons, I selected sections of Jodhka and Newman’s interview transcripts to prompt a conversation about the stigmatisation faced by applicants from certain communities that made securing jobs much more difficult. The second extract in particular generated heated responses from both groups. This quote, which sees an HR manager at an airline company unapologetically admit to preferring candidates from “some regions and some communities” prompted forceful disagreement, with Samir laughing awkwardly and shaking his head as he asked who would say something that was “just wrong” on “so many levels”. Samir’s groupmates agreed with him and were quick to offer reasons why this was an unacceptable way to judge the capacities and qualities of an individual. At first glance, this pushback is progressive; it is a discursive rejection of essentialised tropes that ideologically link ways of being/speaking/behaving with group categorisation. This essentialism was the bedrock of colonial systems of classification that reified “relationships between language, ethnicity and personhood” (Bauman and Briggs 2003; Carlan 2018: 118; Nakassis and Annamalai 2021). While these colonial discourses played an important role in the demarcation and essentialization of caste (Appadurai 1988; Delière 2011; Dirks 2002; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994), caste as a structure has also relied on the construction of caste groups as having fundamental differences, being “inherently more suited” for particular types of work (Dickey 2016: 3) or even having “substantive, embodied qualities” (p. 41). As Srivastava (2022) has shown, those from stigmatised groups, such as those designated by the colonial government as criminal-by-birth castes (Nigam 1990; one of which being the caste many students at the NGO belong to), face recurrent and explicit discrimination on the job market, or are even refused entry on to skills training programmes, due to their assumed caste-based qualities or “mentality” (Srivastava 2022: 5). While caste is conspicuously absent from the HR manager’s extract – subsumed instead under the vague reference to “community” and/or (regional) “cultural difference” – this in itself indicates more about discourses of castelessness (Deshpande 2013) than the actual irrelevance of caste.

Traces of this group essentialism emerged in the participants’ further reactions to the extracts. While the initial responses suggested a rejection of essentialized ways of being, they nonetheless continued to reify group differences, albeit in ways that appear superficially progressive. Responding to the derogatory comments of the HR manager about people from Bihar (who represent a large number of the informal migrant labour workforce in Delhi), Riva argued:

They [the HR manager] have, you know this kind of thinking that maybe UP [Uttar Pradesh] people this and Bihari people, those are those who come from Bihar, they actually are not much educated but I would say this is not the thing, I say that those who comes from that area [...] they are much educated and they’re so hardworking people

The figure of personhood mobilised by the HR manager is steeped in anti-Bihari sentiment (Kumar 2009), a sentiment similarly found in the (often class and caste-coded) ethnic, regional or religious stereotypes that figure in widely circulating jokes about, for example, Biharis, Sikhs or Muslims (Hall 2019; Sanchez 2016). While Riva objects to this negative portrayal, she nonetheless does not take exception to cultural essentialism itself. Instead, she rewrites the narrative of Biharis, praising their commitment to education and their capacity for hard work. In doing so, she mobilises wider narratives that praise the tireless diligence of precarious labourers (of which Bihari migrants make up a sizeable number in Delhi), thereby romanticising exploitation and obscuring the effects of vastly unequal labour relations. The discussion thus becomes one of which group is more or less suited to particular types of work, rather than on how layered systems of exploitation and oppression have produced a hierarchisation of labour and labourers that is justified through discourses of cultural differences, even when the differences cited are benevolent (i.e. even when Biharis are described as “hardworking”).

Shortly after Riva’s comment, Sanjay interjected to share his interpretation of these questions of group essentialism. Like Riva, he makes recourse to culture as a way to explain behaviour, only this time he suggests that cultural differences are not set in stone:

Maybe he’s [HR manager] saying something right there, people are not open up, yes exactly, it’s the culture and the thing they, you know you you put Tarzan in New York City he would not be reflecting much accordingly, so like, I give a very bad example (laughs) I know but it’s not that Tarzan is bad or Tarzan cannot do anything (laughs) Tarzan has multi-talented [Samir: yeah]. He would take time, so I think instead of giving the space they are closing the space.

Through his Tarzan analogy, which Samir appears to agree with, Sanjay offers an explanation for the HR managers’ blatant discrimination, suggesting that they may not be entirely wrong: it’s “the culture” which makes us more or less suited for particular spaces but, importantly, this can be changed over time. Tarzan is neither inherently good nor bad – he is just different due to his cultural background, and if individuals such as the HR manager were able to see this and give him time and opportunity (“the space”) to develop himself then we would see how he is “multi-talented”. In the workshop with management, Priyansh offered a similar account:

Somebody who comes from let us say Bihar and steps into Delhi it takes around few years to understand the culture of Delhi and uh set into it and be a part of it, otherwise all all all the mother tongue influence and the culture and everything that just doesn’t match up with uh with with what the job requirements are or with the the corporate culture I would say.

Through this cultural perspective we have on the one hand a (seemingly) progressive way of talking about human difference, one which rejects essentialized discourses of

caste or ethnicity. The problem of social mobility – i.e. why, in Priyansh’s words, some people’s way of speaking and being “just doesn’t match up with ... the job requirements” – is no longer located (explicitly) in an inherent caste self but rather in a (vaguely labelled) community or regional culture. In doing so, however, the subjugation of Bihari migrants in Delhi through caste and capitalist relations of exploitation is erased as their social mobility/oppression is framed in terms of cultural differences which naturalise their assumed suitability for manual labour. Thus, rather than being an empowering move, by displacing the issue of social oppression from an immutable essentialized self over to a potentially improvable self, fashioned through equal-but-different cultures, the problem continues again to be located in the individual and what they can and should do to lift themselves out of poverty, rather than on wider structural relations in which they are embedded. In other words, it suggests that the way out of social oppression is by working to correct your cultural differences that don’t ‘match’ with the job market: that is, by developing your personality.

## 6 The improvable self: unleashing potential

The entire rationale – and indeed justification – of the NGO rests upon the premise that ‘selves’ are not simply malleable but *improvable*. In this way, the essentialised self, as a hierarchised figure of personhood attached to murky signifiers such as ‘community’, lingers on – no longer as an *immutable* self, but as an obstacle that can be overcome through self-work. In the workshops, Karuna shared a story that echoed this narrative – a narrative that I often heard from students, too. She told us about the time she was waiting with a group of students outside the centre, and a rickshaw driver had been “shocked” to find out that the students were not from a private school and were in fact “government school” students from “underprivileged sectors”. According to Karuna, the NGO programme had allowed them to “polish their skills and develop a personality”. This not only meant they could shake off the stereotypes of “underprivileged” students who are “just hooligans who don’t know how to speak” and therefore pass for an (English-medium) privately educated student, it also rendered their career opportunities “immense”. For Karuna and many others, this combination of English and personality development is constructed as making all the difference to these student’s lives and prospects. It is not just the ideology of *language* as pure potential (Park 2021) but an *English-speaking personality* as pure potential.

The focus on the existing potential of students undergirded much of the discussions. Many of those working in the NGO saw their role as offering opportunities

to students who otherwise could not access them, as providing the conditions to tease out the ‘good’ that exists within every student. As Pooja recounted:

[the NGO] is a platform uh that provides you an environment where you could explore new things, different skill sets, and unlock, unlock the existing potential that you have, your aspirations that you have so [NGO] is providing that environment to students where you know we are showing direction and path to them where they could explore new things, new skill set.

Much like in Sanjay’s Tarzan analogy, Pooja’s description of the effects of the programme on students subscribes to a conceptualisation of the self that reinforces the capacity for self-improvement, and which – at least superficially – appears to liberate students from a future preordained by an immutable nature or culture. Pooja describes this capacity for change as being dependent on the right “environment”, and in doing so implicitly acknowledges the unequal distribution of resources that prevent the vast majority of Indian youth from accessing private English medium schools and costly coaching centres that equip students with cultural and social capital. However, the reference to appropriate “environments” that allow students to flourish (or not) also implicitly mobilises discourses that locate the obstacle to social mobility in “a cultural, cognitive and linguistic deficit located within the speakers, their families, and their communities” (Cushing 2022: 5). While the discourse of universal potentiality appears to stand in opposition to essentializing discourses that pigeonhole students into stable categories, it nonetheless reinscribes deficit ideologies by constructing students as fundamentally lacking – a deficit which is attributed rather euphemistically to their “culture” (as in Sanjay’s Tarzan analogy) or “environment” (Pooja). This implicit deficit framing thus legitimises the work of training programmes as crucial egalitarian interventions that provide the students with tools to unleash their potential and obscures their reliance upon a hierarchisation of stratified personhoods which situates the middle-class, upper-caste, cosmopolitan self as the unmarked desirable norm and minoritised communities as deficient. Moreover, constructed as a universal capacity, self-improvement is resignified as not simply a possibility, but an imperative, as the onus is placed on the student to invest in models of neoliberal subjecthood (Martín Rojo and Del Percio 2019) and take responsibility for their own advancement. In other words, as I frequently heard: your attitude and not your aptitude decides your altitude.

In this discourse of universal potential, social mobility of the so-called underprivileged appears achievable through work on the self that aligns actors with desirable personhoods, rather than through community organising, mobilisation or other political action that seeks to combat processes that marginalise certain communities and naturalise them as deficient. This is not to say, however, that members of the NGO were unaware or uncaring of these socio-political inequalities. There were many moments at which the political realities of marginalised groups came to the fore, particularly in Samir’s contributions:

Our curriculum is basically designed in this way only basic basic basic, we talk about how to be civilised first, just to learn how to be you know in a civil behaviour everything related to that, so we teach that and then we talk about how to be a manager and then we talked about in the last how to be an intellectual person, so like these three stages they develop one by one and we [Indians] do know how to be polite just we don’t talk about it ’cause we have like bigger fish to fry ’cause like (laughs) there are other major things to do so they’ll be like like I think politeness not a big deal, we can implement it whenever we want to (laughs), let’s stop the shooting outside right now (Samir & Katy laugh)

Samir moved on from this point rather quickly and we didn’t return to it; I can therefore only guess at what he was referring to based on what I know from our discussions and the relationship we have built over the last 5 years. It may have been a literal comment on the shooting of protesters at Jamia Millia Islamia university protests over the Islamophobic Citizen Amendment Act in early 2020; it may have been a comment on the targeted bloodshed wrought by Hindu nationalists upon Muslims and their homes and businesses in North–East Delhi in response to the CAA protests; it may have simply been an allusion to the unrelenting lynching of Dalits and Muslims. I was reluctant to press him, given the potential risk of engaging in such political discussions, particularly for Muslim men who risk being labelled as anti-nationalist (Lall and Anand 2022). Perhaps Samir’s laugh here – as he refers to something which is objectively not funny at all – indicates his unease at broaching these subjects. I cannot be sure, of course, but what Samir shares is interesting in how he takes a step back from the individualising discourse of personality development and points (albeit vaguely) to how many would-be students of the NGO are uninterested in improving their “personalities” as they have to navigate socio-political and material structures (“we have like bigger fish to fry”) that put their wellbeing, social mobility and even lives at risk (“let’s stop the shooting outside right now”). While Samir overall defended personality development as an important tool for aiding mobility – indeed, as a previous student himself of the NGO he is an example of the potential of the programme – in his comment, the *raison d’être* of the NGO suddenly finds itself on shaky ground, as he forces us to confront the absurdity of ‘personality development’ as a means to protect oneself from targeted and brutal violence.

## 7 Conclusions

In her discussion of collective action in the Telugu Spoken Language Movement, Lisa Mitchell argues that “collective efforts to ‘make known’ grievances have been subject to the reframing of the meaning of collective assembly” (2019: 52) which paints the collective airing of grievances as angry insurgency. Locating this shift within British backlash to the anti-colonial struggle as well as wider collective assembly against other aspects of social hierarchy, she argues that the consequences are a

“valorization of individual speech action” (p. 53) which diffuses and distorts the power of collective action. This wider context of socio-historical and political economic conditions that Mitchell points to is vital for understanding how personality development comes to be legitimised as a means of social mobility. The depoliticization and hyper-individualisation of social mobility through its re-framing as the pursuit of personality development sits in parallel with Mitchell’s argument, as it depends upon the delegitimation of social mobility as a collective concern, and its discursive relocation within the sphere of the individual. To achieve this, it draws on, obfuscates, and juxtaposes conflicting yet overlapping discourses of ‘essential’, ‘malleable’, or ‘improvable’ selves.

This move is thus *hyper*-individualising: it not only locates the solution to social inequality at the level of the individual, but it also discredits attempts to emphasise the political potential of collectivisation by constructing these as anti-emancipatory, as old, tired habits of collective identification. That is, by attaching itself to the notion of the individual as an endlessly improvable self, this discourse offers itself as a progressive alternative to essentialized discourses of colonial and caste selves, thereby legitimising neoliberal subjecthood, and undermining community or identity-based struggles. Of course, this opposition of the neoliberal individual self to an essentialised self is only superficial. As we saw in the slippages in the NGO participants’ discussions, the question of students’ perceived deficiencies (or “scope for improvement”) is articulated in ways that appear to reject colonial and caste categorisation, while simultaneously mobilising these same ideologies to reify members of particular communities as deficient. The figure of the essentialized caste and colonial self thus lingers: it continues to link hierarchised ways of being/doing/speaking to group membership (subsumed, this time, under the less loaded terms of “cultural” or “regional” identities) while, at the same time, it becomes the foil against which the discourse of individualised self-improvement negotiates its moral legitimacy. These apparently contradictory discourses of the self thus work together – at times being strategically placed in opposition – to not only legitimise an individualised approach to social mobility, but equally to delegitimise attempts to articulate social inequality in terms of caste or other such structural organisation, rebuffing the latter as hindering the potential for individuals to embrace liberation through self-work.

The construction of social mobility through self-development is thus also a depoliticising move, not only through how it severs “personality development” from processes of social stratification, but also in how it delegitimises the politics of communal struggle, relegating it to “the shameful trope of ‘backwardness’ that so often stalks the popular Indian imagination” (Sanchez 2016, p. 301), reducing it to the type of “narrow regional and caste loyalties that have no place in modern industry and which serve only to undermine the productivity of the workplace” (Sanchez 2012,

p. 819). In one of my first weeks at the NGO, I asked a senior trainer if they recorded students’ castes at enrolment. My question was met with wide-eyes and a vigorous shaking of the head. My cheeks blazed red as I realised that I had made somewhat of a faux pas, and I felt deeply embarrassed for bringing a taboo subject into a place where it was clearly not welcome. This is certainly not unique to the NGO. As Gooptu has written, this “unwillingness to countenance an engagement with the systemic political and social underpinnings of inequality and poverty” (2016: 972) is a defining feature of the post-independence, post-liberalisation middle classes, whose valorisation of “the autonomous, self-governed, responsible citizen as the protagonist of a modern and modernizing nation” (p. 972) reallocates responsibility of social welfare from the state to well-meaning philanthropists implementing poverty solutions. Against this backdrop, the provision of skills and other such tools of self-improvement for ‘disadvantaged’ students emerges as a morally superior social good, positioned in contrast with a putatively regressive “politics of quotas and the culture of handouts that these are seen to represent” (Jayal 2015: 119). Juxtaposed with such ostensibly un-modern, un-civilised ways, the NGO’s own practice is evacuated of the socio-historical and political structures, processes and rationalities that enable it. Consequently, social mobility through personality development gets naturalised as the civilised, modern means for individual advancement: a moralised a-political pursuit for which ‘good’, hardworking, middle-class citizens should strive. These discourses are part of what form the “conditions of possibility” that allow “politics to be recognized and practiced as politics” (Zienkowski 2019, p. 144) – and, I would add, as *not* politics, as *undesirable* politics. At stake is therefore not only a struggle over competing means of social mobility; this is a struggle over the (de) legitimisation of the political, over the production of (de)politicised subjectivities.

Personality development is infused by seemingly contradictory, but in practice complementary, discourses surrounding the nature of the self, that appeal to middle-class, modern, neoliberal moralities. Through these moralising regimes, students are produced as depoliticised subjects, exhorted to look away from the collective as a legitimate political resource to combat inequality, and towards the transformation, development and performance of an (English-speaking) personality as the solution to structural marginalisation.

## References

- Allan, Kori. 2013. Skilling the self: The communicability of immigrants as flexible labour. In Alexandre Duchêne, Melissa G. Moyer & Celia Roberts (eds.), *Language, migration and social inequalities: A critical sociolinguistic perspective on institutions and work*. Bristol; Buffalo: Multilingual Matters.

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1988. Putting hierarchy in its place. *Cultural Anthropology* 3(1). 36–49.
- Bauman, Richard & Charles L. Briggs. 2003. *Voices of modernity: Language ideologies and the politics of inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carlan, Hannah. 2018. “In the mouth of an aborigine”: Language ideologies and logics of racialization in the linguistic survey of India. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 252. 97–123.
- Chandras, Jessica Sujata. 2021. Student identity in the Indian university: Language and educational stereotypes in higher education. *Journal of Belonging, Identity, Language, and Diversity (J-BILD)* 25–41.
- Codó, Eva & Maria Rosa Garrido. 2014. Shifting discourses of migrant incorporation at a time of crisis: Understanding the articulation of language and labour in the Catalan non-governmental sector. *International Journal of Multilingualism* 11(4). 389–408.
- Cushing, Ian. 2022. Word rich or word poor? Deficit discourses, raciolinguistic ideologies and the resurgence of the “word gap” in England’s education policy. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2022.2102014>.
- Datta, Abhishek Ranjan. 2022. More than language: The work of an English training centre in Delhi. *Third World Quarterly* 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2136069>.
- Deliège, Robert. 2011. Caste, class, and untouchability. In Isabelle Clark-Decès (ed.), *A companion to the anthropology of India*, 45–61. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Deshpande, Ashwini. 2011. *The grammar of caste: Economic discrimination in contemporary India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Deshpande, Satish. 2013. Caste and castelessness: Towards a biography of the “general category”. *Economic and Political Weekly* 48(15). 32–39.
- Dickey, Sara. 2016. *Living class in urban India*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. 2002. *Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Duchêne, Alexandre & Monica Heller. 2012. *Language in late capitalism: Pride and profit*. New York: Routledge.
- Dumont, Louis. 1980. *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fernandes, Leela. 2006. *India’s new middle class: Democratic politics in an era of economic reform*. Minneapolis, Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fernandes, Leela. 2015. India’s middle classes in contemporary India. In Knut A. Jacobsen (ed.), *Routledge handbook of contemporary India*, 232–242. Routledge.
- Flubacher, Mi-Cha & Alfonso Del Percio (eds.). 2017. *Language, education and neoliberalism: Critical studies in sociolinguistics*. Bristol, UK; Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Multilingual Matters.
- Flubacher, Mi-Cha, Alexandre Duchêne & Renata Coray. 2018. *Language investment and employability: The uneven distribution of resources in the public employment service*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gooptu, Nandini (ed.). 2013. *Enterprise culture in neoliberal India: Studies in youth, class, work and media*. London: Routledge.
- Gooptu, Nandini. 2016. New spirituality, politics of self-empowerment, citizenship, and democracy in contemporary India. *Modern Asian Studies* 50(3). 934–974.
- Gupta, Dipankar (ed.). 2004. *Caste in question: Identity or hierarchy?* Contributions to Indian Sociology 12. New Delhi; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.
- Hall, Kira. 2019. Middle class timelines: Ethnic humor and sexual modernity in Delhi. *Language in Society* 48(4). 491–517.
- Hightet, Katy. 2022. “She will control my son”: Navigating womanhood, English and social mobility in India. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 26(5). 648–665.



- Highet, Katy & Alfonso Del Percio. 2021a. When linguistic capital isn't enough: Personality development and English speakerhood as capital in India. In John E. Petrovic & Bedrettin Yazan (eds.), *The commodification of language*, 127–143. London: Routledge.
- Highet, Katy & Alfonso Del Percio. 2021b. Hard work, growth mindset, fluent English: Navigating neoliberal logics. In Mitja Sardoč (ed.), *The impacts of Neoliberal discourse and language in education*, 100–119. New York: Routledge.
- Jayadeva, Sazana. 2018. “Below English line”: An ethnographic exploration of class and the English language in post-liberalization India. *Modern Asian Studies* 52(2). 576–608.
- Jayal, Niraja Gopal. 2015. Affirmative action in India: Before and after the neo-liberal turn. *Cultural Dynamics* 27(1). 117–133.
- Jodhka, Surinder S. 2015. Caste: Why does it still matter? In Knut A. Jacobsen (ed.), *Routledge handbook of contemporary India*, 243–255. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Jodhka, Surinder S. & Katherine Newman. 2007. In the name of globalisation: Meritocracy, productivity and the hidden language of caste. *Economic and Political Weekly* 42(41). 4125–4132.
- Kumar, Awanish. 2009. A class analysis of the “Bihari menace”. *Economic and Political Weekly* 44(28). 124–127.
- LaDousa, Chaise. 2014. *Hindi is our ground, English is our sky*. New York: Berghahn.
- Lall, Marie & Kusha Anand. 2022. *Bridging neoliberalism and Hindu nationalism: the role of education in bringing about contemporary India*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Martín Rojo, Luisa & Alfonso Del Percio. 2019. *Language and neoliberal governmentality*. London; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mathew, Leya. 2022. *English linguistic imperialism from below: Moral aspiration and social mobility*. Bristol, UK; Jackson, TN: Multilingual Matters.
- McGuire, Meredith Lindsay. 2013. The embodiment of professionalism: Personality-development programmes in New Delhi. In Nandini Gooptu (ed.), *Enterprise culture in neoliberal India: Studies in youth, class, work and media*, 109–123. London: Routledge.
- Mitchell, Lisa. 2019. Language regimes and corporeal practices of “making known”: Speech action, collective assembly, and the politics of recognition in India. *Language & Communication, Problematizing Language Regimes* 66(May). 41–54.
- Mosse, David. 2020. The modernity of caste and the market economy. *Modern Asian Studies* 54(4). 1225–1271.
- Nakassis, Constantine V. & E. Annamalai. 2021. Linguistic diversity in south asia, reconsidered. *The international Encyclopedia of linguistic anthropology*, 1–21. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Natrajan, Balmurli. 2018. Cultural identity and beef festivals: Toward a “multiculturalism against caste”. *Contemporary South Asia* 26(3). 287–304.
- Nigam, Sanjay. 1990. Disciplining and policing the “criminals by birth”, part 1: The making of a colonial stereotype—the criminal tribes and castes of North India. *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 27(2). 131–164.
- Osella, Filippo & Caroline Osella. 2000. *Social mobility in Kerala: Modernity and identity in conflict*. London: Pluto Press.
- Pandian, M. S. S. 2002. One step outside modernity: Caste, identity politics and public sphere. *Economic and Political Weekly* 37(18). 1735–1741.
- Park, Joseph Sung-Yul. 2021. *In pursuit of English: Language and subjectivity in neoliberal South Korea*. Oxford Studies in Sociolinguistics. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sanchez, Andrew. 2012. Deadwood and paternalism: Rationalizing casual labour in an Indian company town. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18(4). 808–827.

- Sanchez, Andrew. 2016. Profane relations: The irony of offensive jokes in India. *History and Anthropology* 27(3). 296–312.
- Searle-Chatterjee, Mary & Ursula Sharma. 1994. *Contextualising caste: Post-dumontian approaches*. Sociological Review Monograph Series. Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishers/Sociological review.
- Sharma, Kanhaiya Lal. 2019. *Caste, social inequality and mobility in rural India: Reconceptualizing the Indian village*. New Delhi: SAGE Publishing India.
- Sharma, Ursula. 1994. Berreman revisited; caste and the comparative method. In Mary Searle-Chatterjee & Ursula Sharma (eds.), *Contextualising caste: Post-dumontian approaches*, 72–91. Sociological Review Monograph Series. Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishers/Sociological Review.
- Srivastava, Sanjay. 2022. Relational flexibility: Skills, “personality development,” and the limits of theorizing neoliberal selfhood in India. *American Ethnologist* 49(4). 1–13.
- Subramanian, Ajantha. 2015. Making merit: The Indian Institutes of Technology and the social life of caste. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57(2). 291–322.
- Subramanian, Ajantha. 2019. Meritocracy and democracy: Indian reservations and the politics of caste. *Public Culture* 31(2). 275–288.
- Tierney, William, Nidhi Sabharwal & CM Malish. 2019. Inequitable structures: Class and caste in Indian higher education. *Qualitative Inquiry* 25(5). 471–481.
- Upadhy, Carol. 2011. Software and the “new” middle class in the “new India”. In Amita Baviskar & Raka Ray (eds.), *Elite and everyman: The cultural politics of the Indian middle classes*, 167–192. New York: Routledge.
- Urciuoli, Bonnie. 2008. Skills and selves in the new workplace. *American Ethnologist* 35(2). 211–228.
- Vaid, Divya. 2018. *Uneven odds: Social mobility in contemporary India*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Van Hoof, Sarah, Sara Nyssen & Sibob Kanobana. 2020. “If they could, they would put them on a drip with Dutch”: Language learning and the professional integration of migrants in Flanders. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 264. 73–94.
- Van Wessel, Margit. 2011. Cultural contractions and intergenerational relations: The construction of selfhood among middle-class youth in Baroda. In Henrike Donner (ed.), *Being middle-class in India: A way of life*, 100–116. *Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series* 53. London; New York: Routledge.
- Zienkowski, Jan. 2019. Politics and the political in critical discourse studies: State of the art and a call for an intensified focus on the metapolitical dimension of discursive practice. *Critical Discourse Studies* 16(2). 131–148.