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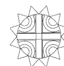

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ARTICLE

Dilemmas of vulnerability in Indian education NGOs: Neoliberal subjectivity, emotions, and class-based employment hierarchies in Delhi

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Abstract
Neoliberal discourse seems to simultaneously demand Delhi's education NGOs to foreground social emotional learning that promotes emotional vulnerability and requires educational leaders to passionately present as “resilient” entrepreneurs who must not let emotions influence their capacity to lead. This article ethnographically analyzes the relational dynamics in these NGOs and argues that the complexity of navigating this subjective neoliberal dilemma reproduces class-based employment hierarchy in NGO leadership, hindering NGO aims to further social justice.

KEYWORDS
affect, education, entrepreneurialism, India, subjectification

INTRODUCTION

Joy, Trust, Fear, Surprise, Sadness, Disgust, Anger, and Anticipation.

These were the emotions wheeled out on paper in front of us as we took part in a team-building workshop for the Delhi-based education NGO Clear-Space. Then came the instruction, “Go stand next to the emotion that best characterizes your current life” (Fieldnote, July 2019). Most team members shuffled towards Joy, Trust, or Fear, while Baan, the organization's founder and CEO, stood back from the circle and hovered somewhere between Sadness and Disgust. When the facilitator asked Baan to share more about his feelings, the latter refused and shrunk further back.

Baan, a Bengali Brahmin man in his early thirties, founded Clear-Space to partner with government-run primary schools to improve the quality of education provision in India. Here in this workshop, he was caught in a dilemma typical of the education development community

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in which he works. Minutes earlier, Baan had privately expressed to me his disappointment in his employees: in a recent survey they'd complained Clear-Space didn't support them enough with career progression. And yet here, confronted with an opportunity to explain his sadness, Baan declines. As I argue in this paper, Baan's response is one of a neoliberal subject who is expected to find both emotional fulfillment and professional prestige through work in the education development industry. By expressing and reflecting on his emotions in public, Baan could gain a sense of belonging and community that might meet his emotional need. To succeed professionally, however, Baan believes he must present as consistently resilient and ever optimistic in front of the NGO team he has employed. Baan's struggle with this subjective dilemma was further revealed as the facilitator announced the next task, "Think of a person in your life with whom you want a deeper connection" (Fieldnote, July 2019). First, Baan looked dejected and said he couldn't think of anyone, then after a moment he defiantly proclaimed:

> My life is 100% Clear-Space. There is no, 10% friends, 20% family, 70% Clear-Space. It's not like that for me.
>
> (Fieldnote, July 2019)

As I show throughout this article, the network of education NGOs in which Clear-Space operates are part of a neoliberal imaginary of Indian education development which aims to shape its workers into entrepreneurial subjects. These networks tap into an entrepreneurial culture which, as recent anthropologists argue, influences how young people gain respectable status in contemporary India (Gooptu, 2013; Irani, 2019; Sancho, 2015). The article explores the relational dynamics between staff and beneficiaries in two start-up education NGOs in Delhi who are navigating the complex emotional and professional demands of entrepreneurial subjectivity. I argue that navigating this entrepreneurial subjectivity produces *dilemmas of vulnerability* that engender anxiety in education leaders and that can reproduce social hierarchy within NGO employment structures. To do this, I use a Foucauldian analysis of neoliberalism in which neoliberalism is a "peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms" (Brown, 2015, p. 17), and a discourse that interpellates subjects as human capital (Feher, 2009). For Michel Feher, the defining practice of the human capital subject is to "constantly value or appreciate" oneself and frame oneself as a "set of skills" (Feher, 2009, p. 27). Feher distinguishes American neoliberalism from traditional liberalism by comparing liberalism's "split self"—where the free market is valorized, but the individual gains spiritual and emotional sustenance beyond the market—and the American neoliberals' attempt to "challenge the alleged heterogeneity between the aspirations of the authentic self and the kind of optimizing calculations required by the business world" (Feher, 2009, p. 33). Here, the neoliberal "human capital" subject becomes an "investor in themselves" to develop a "portfolio of conducts" (Feher, 2009) that help them acquire both material security and spiritual/emotional stability through the same means. Recent ethnographic analyses of this neoliberal subject focus on how subjects learn to craft "entrepreneurial selves" in response to such neoliberal subjectification (Freeman, 2014; Irani, 2019). In this article, I use the terms "neoliberal subject" and "fused self" to refer to Feher's conception of the human capital subject articulated above, especially regarding how subjects seek both material security (professional success) and emotional stability (meaningful, moral, authentic relationships) through their work as leaders of Delhi education NGOs.

I use the concept of the neoliberal "fused self" to argue that contemporary education development discourse in Delhi induces organizations to centralize values such as "vulnerability," "curiosity," and "empathy" as key to the moral and professional development of both staff and beneficiaries, and simultaneously requires individuals to present as self-reliant,

self-managed, and emancipated from the influence of structural disadvantage. The result is that, in the tension to meet both demands, education leaders choose to didactically instruct juniors in the importance of individualized resilience and close space for reflection both on the structural conditions that create inequality, and the actual emotions they feel within these structures. In doing so, educational leaders foreclose the potential for emotional connection with juniors and colleagues that might lead to the very emotional fulfillment at work that they desire *as* neoliberal subjects. Furthermore, I show that in at least one instance, it is those from marginalized backgrounds who lose their leadership positions in education NGOs as they aspire to operate as a neoliberal "fused self."[1] Ultimately, I argue that neoliberal subjectification influences education NGOs to reproduce a social hierarchy in their employment structure similar to that which that their education initiatives are designed to dispel.

My argument speaks with other anthropologists who want to understand the effects of neoliberal discourse on education development in India and who have identified "aspiration" as a key concept of study (Mathew & Lukose, 2020), deepening earlier work on aspiration and class (Appadurai, 2004; Bhatt et al., 2010; Fernandes & Heller, 2006). While attention has been given to how unrealistic aspirations can produce anxiety in intended beneficiaries (Desai, 2023), and even how aspirations are policed through "shaming" (Mathew, 2018), less attention has fallen on how aspirations are shaped—and sought to be achieved—in the *educators* who administer these pedagogies. Furthermore, sociologist of education Stephen Ball calls for a deeper ethnographic analysis of the powerful leaders of NGOs who administer these pedagogies (Ball, 2016a), and although social scientists have responded (Desai, 2020; Irani, 2019, pp. 53–81; Subramanian, 2018), I intend to supplement these works by providing rich ethnographic detail of how education leaders behave in the everyday. This article addresses the above-mentioned gaps and provides an ethnography of *educators* who lead influential Indian education NGOs and administer "pedagogies of aspiration." Furthermore, the article defends theoretical frameworks of neoliberalism against recent suggestion that they are unproductive for analyzing subjectivities in liberalizing India (Srivastava, 2022a, 2022b).

I begin by framing the relationship between neoliberal subjectivity, entrepreneurial education discourse, and social emotional learning curriculums in Delhi. I then introduce my fieldsite, research and data analysis methods, and positionality, before committing the bulk of the article to ethnographic analysis. I close by addressing the implications of neoliberal subjectification on NGO operationality, and how my argument relates to wider anthropological conversations about entrepreneurialism, aspiration, and educational development in India and abroad.

NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTS IN INDIAN EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT

Since the economic liberalization of the nation in the 1990s, anthropologists of India have explored to what extent "neoliberalism" is a useful frame for understanding new behaviors witnessed under free-market capitalism. While earlier analyses focused on the influence of consumption and the "consumer citizen" (Lukose, 2009; Osella & Osella, 1999), more recent work squarely names India as "neoliberal" (Gooptu, 2013). Nandini Gooptu identifies the "active enterprising citizen"—one who is "self-regulated, self-governed and self-disciplined"—as the rising subjectivity of this new neoliberal culture (Gooptu, 2013, p. 4). Like Feher (2009), Gooptu invokes Foucault and claims that central to this new "citizen" is the practice of seeing oneself as an enterprise to invest in Foucault (2000). Furthermore, Gooptu recognizes how important is it within an Indian context for regimes of governance

and subjectification to "valorize and moralize the individual pursuit of the self," because, historically, Indian cultural norms privilege the "social" over the individual (Gooptu, 2013, p. 7). She writes that self-investment must be redesigned "in terms of a moral and virtuous quest for individual responsibility, self-actualization, and self-determination" (Gooptu, 2013). Indeed, Lilly Irani offers "entrepreneurial citizenship" as a frame to understand how projects of the self in India can, as Gooptu suggests, take on moral value (Irani, 2019). She argues that "entrepreneurial citizenship promises that citizens can construct markets, produce value, and do nation building all at the same time" (Irani, 2019, p. 2). Irani's analysis resonates with Andrea Muehlebach's ethnography of volunteers in northern Italy, in which she argues that neoliberalism has always been moral (Muehlebach, 2012). I argue that Irani's "entrepreneurial citizen" is a localized example of Muehlebach's "moral neoliberal" and read both these terms as conceptual analogues to the "fused self" of Feher's human capital subject. In this article, the term "fused self" is applied to educationalists who seek emotional and professional fulfillment through embodying and teaching entrepreneurial citizenship in their role as leaders of education development.

Sociologists of education describe India's education development industry as characterized by a "neoliberal imaginary" deeply influenced by education policies and pedagogies developed for and by the West (Ball, 2012; Gray et al., 2020; Lingard & Rizvi, 2010; Verger et al., 2015), and an industry that is becoming increasingly entrepreneurial (Balagopalan, 2022; Ball, 2016a; Subramanian, 2017). In India, anthropologists of education have identified "aspiration" as a central discourse of this imaginary and one that offers false promise to children from both rural and urban marginalized backgrounds (Ansell et al., 2020; Mathew & Lukose, 2020). Born of liberalization, "pedagogies of aspiration necessitate forms of self-fashioning" that involve "aesthetic and affective labor" (Mathew & Lukose, 2020, p. 692). These pedagogies have been identified in a range of educational sites, from high-end private schools (Chidsey, 2020) and middle-class secondary schools (Sancho, 2015) to English-medium primary schools (Mathew, 2018) and NGO-delivered "life skills" programs (Desai, 2020, 2023). In terms of provenance, these pedagogies can be linked to the wider global trend towards "social emotional learning" (see Hoffman, 2009). In the early 2000s, U.S. educationalists developed the 21st Century Skills' framework, a set of new curriculums centered on social and emotional intelligence (Geisinger, 2016; Mehta et al., 2020). The idea was to prepare children for a neoliberal economy where "soft skills" and interpersonal relations generate capital. A decade or so later, the core concepts of 21st Century Skills—critical thinking, creative thinking, communicating, collaborating—began appearing in social emotional learning (SEL) curriculums in India, perhaps most prominently in the Delhi government's Happiness Curriculum, designed in partnership with NGOs (SCERT-Delhi and DoE, 2019). Key to pedagogies of aspiration, social emotional learning, and 21st century skills is the premise that emotional self-knowledge and professional prosperity are intractably linked (Desai, 2020). While emotions have long been marketized under capitalism (Berlant, 2011; Hochschild, 1983; Illouz, 2007), SEL curriculums actively embrace the potential of the ethically-aligned entrepreneurial subject, an individual who feels good about their work because it aligns with certain "aspirations" both for the public and personal good.

This article draws focus to the Indian NGOs administering social emotional learning within the wider culture of neoliberal education development. I argue that theories of entrepreneurial self-development become entangled with social emotional learning curriculums in a way that impacts the educationalists who seek to lead NGOs. I frame the behaviors of educational leaders as responses to the affective labor it takes to self-fashion into individuals who must "aspire" to develop an authentic, emotionally-connected self while delivering education reform through professionalized roles.

FIELDSITE, METHODS, POSITIONALITY

My relationship to my fieldsite began in 2016 when I spent three months in Delhi researching a UK-based NGO's public-private partnership with a South Delhi local government (MCD[2]) school. Two of the teachers in the school were associated with the NGO Teach-Them and they introduced me to a host of other Teach-Them affiliates. Teach-Them is an influential NGO in what Stephen Ball calls the "Indian Education Reform Movement" (IERM) a "loose network" of socially and financially powerful individuals and NGOs interested in changing education provision in India (Ball, 2016a, p. 556). According to Ball, public-private partnerships, entrepreneurship, and leadership are the "silver bullets" with which the IERM aims to reform Indian education (Ball, 2016a, p. 553). Teach-Them's primary output is a teaching fellowship in which largely middle-class graduates and professionals are speed-trained as teachers then placed in government or NGO schools. It was by volunteering with Teach-Them fellows in government schools across 2016–2017 that I built a research network in Delhi. The ethnographic data in this article is drawn from the doctoral fieldwork I conducted with "start-up" NGOs in the Teach-Them network between March 2019 and March 2020. One of the start-ups was Clear-Space, an education NGO launched in 2014 to improve the quality of primary education in government schools. I was particularly interested in Clear-Space because both its co-founders were Teach-Them alumni, as were around 80% of its employees. Kshamta, the other NGO featured in this article is a social emotional learning education NGO that partners with the Delhi government to deliver the Happiness Curriculum (SCERT, 2024). It was also co-founded by a Teach-Them alumna. I met the other co-founder, Prashant, during an alumni meet-up for a different NGO where we had both previously volunteered. This other NGO, which doesn't feature in this article, was also founded by a Teach-Them alumnus.

My aim in this article is to show how workers in Delhi's start-up education industry struggle to navigate the demand to be neoliberal subjects, and the consequences of this struggle for Indian education development. My method is to analyze the relational dynamics between NGO staff and NGO staff and beneficiaries, then pair this analysis with biographical information that illuminates how positionality and experiences of marginalization influence their navigation of neoliberal subjectivity. Central to my interpretation of neoliberalism is that subjects seek emotional fulfillment through meaningful interpersonal connections, especially in terms of practicing "leadership" and shaping their juniors to succeed as entrepreneurial citizens. To evidence difficult to capture empirical data such as emotional states, I've chosen to narrowly focus on limited ethnographic examples and provide a rich description of the pace, tone and affect of these moments. Here I follow a radical empiricist position that recognizes the value of studying emotions and that "the *relations between things* are just as much matters for empirical study as are things themselves" (Davies, 2010, p. 23).

Most of the data in this paper is drawn from ethnographic participant observation at my primary fieldsite, one of Clear-Space's four Hindi-medium South Delhi public-private partnership schools, where I also volunteered as a drama teacher. During term time, I spent on average three days a week at school. Our NGO team prepared classroom materials, shared tea and lunches, and had numerous debates and confessional conversations. As a school team, we were often called to the head office to attend day-long trainings and team-building workshops, which allowed me to conduct participant observation with Clear-Space co-founder Baan, Schools Director Divya, and observe relational dynamics between these managers and the school teams. I also interviewed Baan and Divya on numerous occasions and socialized with Baan as a friend. In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews with fifteen founders of other education NGOs in Delhi, and did occasional participant observation at their NGOs, such as the school visit with Prashant which appears in this article. Although my Hindi improved immensely by volunteering in the Hindi-medium primary

school, English was the operational language for Clear-Space and Kshamta, and so I used English for all interviews. All conversations reported in this article happened in English unless otherwise stated.

In terms of my own positionality, I am a white cis-heterosexual middle-class man from the U.K. I decided to research Teach-Them alumni because they were university-educated, middle-class, spoke fluent English, and had a shared language in which to practice critical self-reflection. I felt there was a relative level of equality in our experiences of formal education and class-based access to extra-curricular learning. As a mode of critical reflexivity (Coburn & Gormally, 2017), I also spoke to interlocutors about my own experience of the pressures of neoliberal subjectification, and how I feel as if I have been directed by discourse to desire the efficiency, mobility, and individualized purpose so characteristic of neoliberal subjects (McGuigan, 2014; Verdouw, 2017). Since fieldwork, I have written about how global higher education discourse pressures academics to become neoliberal subjects, and the importance of collective reflexivity and collective writing as a mode of survival under these conditions (Campbell et al., 2024).

THE DILEMMA OF VULNERABILITY IN EDUCATION NGO LEADERSHIP (I)

In 2018 social emotional learning NGO Kshamta was selected to help design and implement the Happiness Curriculum, a new set of lessons to be taught in all Delhi-government directed schools.[3] According to its co-founder Prashant, this made Kshamta "the youngest NGO to ever partner with the Delhi government," considering the NGO was less than a year old (Interview, December 2019). According to a government publication, the Curriculum's "sole objective is to help students live happier lives, develop skills like critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, and make meaningful contributions to society" (SCERT-Delhi and DoE, 2019). Furthermore, "In Happiness classes, students are guided to be more aware of their feelings, identify their emotional needs and be cognizant of their responses to circumstances of their own lives as well as others" (SCERT-Delhi and DoE, 2019). In the following section, I argue that Prashant's navigation of neoliberal subjectivity produces a relational dynamic in which both Prashant himself and the intended beneficiaries of the Happiness Curriculum are prevented from practicing the skills the Curriculum advocates.

It was a misty morning in February, and Prashant and I were visiting an NGO-run school in Delhi's satellite city of Noida. Prashant had been invited by an NGO partner of the school to offer a motivational speech to a class of teenage boys who recently completed a program in gender equality. As the boys settled down on the classroom floor, Prashant opened his speech with an aspirational question, "Kids, what do you want to be?" (Fieldnote, February 2020).[4] In descending order, the most popular replies were: soldier, navy, police, engineer, scientist, cricketer, singer, and teacher.

Next, Prashant began telling his life story: his parents' struggles with money, his failure in final school exams, his unpaid internship at a tech start-up, and his decision to leave the corporate world and launch his own non-profit education enterprise. The speech made no mention of Prashant's caste and class privilege: his Brahmin family, the grandparents who paid for his elite private school, and his high-society connections that led to international exchange programs and his internship at a start-up—facts I got to know through one-to-one interviews. Instead, Prashant's self-presentation emphasized his resilience, initiative, and determination, and elided the cultural and social capital that supported him. At one point, Prashant said that the start-up had tried to offer him a salary, but he had refused and told them, "I just want to learn." At this, a thirteen-year-old boy excitedly asked, "How much did

they offer you?", and Prashant replied impatiently, "It's not important, it's just a number." When Prashant mentioned that he went on a business trip to the UK, another boy asked, "What all did you see in the UK?" "That's off topic", Prashant replied, "Yes, I saw fancy things, but it's not important" (Fieldnote, February 2020).

Through telling his audience what is and isn't important, Prashant sets out a moral framework where "learning" is more valuable than money and international travel.[5] Indeed, as founder of a social emotional learning NGO, Prashant's focus on learning is unsurprising. But it is the *way* Prashant communicates with the boys which seems misaligned with the Happiness Curriculum he helped to design. Rather than ask the boys why they are interested in money and travel, and promote curiosity and reflection, Prashant names their desires as "not important."

In our taxi ride after the event, Prashant hinted at the reasons for this impatience and dismissiveness. He was furious that the children gave "off-the-shelf" answers to his opening question on their future professional aspirations. He said, "I can't possibly believe that these young men don't have passions they want to follow" (Interview, February 2020). In a separate interview I conducted with Prashant, he explained that the aim of social emotional learning is to turn children into "changemakers" (Interview, December 2019). For Prashant, children will not become "changemakers" if they aspire to secure government employment as soldiers, police officers, or even teachers. These public sector jobs do not align with the neoliberal preference for 'disruptive' market intervention as route to prosperity and growth. Instead, children must passionately imagine the world they want to see realized and find a way to help realize that world. Prashant's teenage audience, however, come from low-income families with no connection to the elite networks that Prashant accessed to begin his entrepreneurial journey. Furthermore, Prashant's didacticism leaves no room for them to reflect on *why* they want to be soldiers and police officers, and *why* they care about money and travel.

As the questions mounted, Prashant began to repeat two phrases: "*Bine soche pucho*" [Ask questions without thinking], and "*apna saval pucho*" [Ask your own question] (Fieldnote, February 2020). Again, Prashant's language suggests the entrepreneurial ethic that seems to undergird it; a good neoliberal subject identifies their "own" feelings—or "passions"—and uses these to guide their aspirations in the world. It is striking then how Prashant himself responds to a child's request for emotional honesty, as displayed in the following vignette. Earlier in the speech, Prashant spoke of his determination to start his education NGO, and how he knocked on the doors of 79 schools, until one principal finally invited him to discuss his plan. Remembering this perhaps, a boy asks:

> ***Boy:*** How did you feel when those schools rejected you? Was there struggle?
> ***Prashant:*** We all have struggles, rich people and poor. (Fieldnote, February 2020)

Here arises a perfect opportunity for Prashant and the boy to practice the Happiness Curriculum's aim of becoming "more aware" of feelings and communicating them with others. Instead, Prashant universalizes the experience of "struggle," thereby diminishing its relevance. Prashant could have shared—as he did with me in private—how painful it was to be rejected by school after school and how hard it was to keep motivated. But instead he seems directed by a neoliberal imaginary in which resilience and hardship must be overcome regardless of their intensity or relatedness to other social or financial situations.

I argue that Prashant is caught in a dilemma of the neoliberal subject: to succeed professionally he believes he must convince these boys they can become social entrepreneurs like him, and that the central skill of an entrepreneur is resilience. However, in the rush to promote "resilience," Prashant forgets the social emotional learning tools which could help him emotionally connect to his audience and gain emotional fulfillment. Like Baan, in the opening

vignette, who would not elaborate on his sadness and disgust during a team-building exercise, Prashant is caught in a dilemma of vulnerability: he must present as both indomitable and emotionally sensitive all at once. Neoliberal education discourse seems to simultaneously demand organizations like Kshamta to foreground a social emotional learning which promotes emotional vulnerability and require educational leaders like Prashant to passionately present as "resilient" entrepreneurs who must not let emotional desire influence their capacity to lead. In this case, not only does Prashant fail to exemplify the pedagogy of his NGO, but he also reproduces the neoliberal discourse of individualized responsibilisation in which class or caste privilege is ignored. Let us take another example from a different education NGO.

THE DILEMMA OF VULNERABILITY IN EDUCATION NGO LEADERSHIP (II)

Clear-Space is a South Delhi-based education NGO that, in 2019, operated by sending small NGO-employed teams into government-run schools to help improve teaching and learning. Below I explore the relational dynamics between two Teach-Them alumni Clear-Space leaders, the office-based "Schools Director" Divya and in-school "School Leader" Arushi, as they navigate their professional relationship to each other and their junior employees, and their difficulty in practicing the social emotional learning their NGO promotes.

Arushi comes from a general caste, non-Brahmin Tamil family and was in her mid-thirties at the time of fieldwork. Born an unwanted "girl child," her parents sent her to live with her grandmother and only brought her home once her younger brother was born. She grew up in a low-income informal settlement similar to her would-be mentees Suraj and Kasak, who we meet below. Upon joining school, her father—a low-ranking government official—forged her a Scheduled Caste certificate to reduce her school fees.[6] Throughout school and university, Arushi's classmates saw her as both low-caste and underserving. Arushi carried her erroneous caste-label to university, where, seemingly based on caste bias, one tutor enrolled her in soldering classes without her consent (i.e. associating her with manual labor). Arushi later got married to a Brahmin man who physically abused her and tried to steal money from her family. At first Arushi blamed herself, because, in her words, she had "internalized a sense of inferiority from her experiences of casteism" and thought her husband was "better because he was Brahmin" (Fieldnote, October 2019). In her early thirties Arushi quit her corporate job, left her husband, and moved to Delhi with her four-year-old daughter to join the Teach-Them fellowship. She had very little money and struggled to find housing due to landlord discrimination against single mothers. By the end of the fellowship, she had lost both her parents, and had only limited contact with her one brother, who lived abroad.

Divya's background is quite different. She was born into a wealthy, upper-caste Punjabi business family, attended one of Delhi's most prestigious private schools, and studied at university in the United States. At the time of fieldwork, she was in her early thirties, lived with her husband in their own apartment, had no kids, and—despite historical disagreements with her family about her career choices—maintained a good relationship with both her parents.

In 2019, Clear-Space School Director Divya announced that the organization had a new Student Vision, a set of values developed via workshops and discussions with a small group of the NGO's employees. The values were:

Collaboration
Critical Thinking
Creativity

Empathy
Grit
Curiosity

The values echo those presented in a number of interrelated social emotional learning (SEL) frameworks used and developed by Clear-Space and other Teach-Them NGOs, such as 21st Century Skills (Geisinger, 2016), SEE Learning curriculum (Emory University, 2024) and the Delhi government Happiness Curriculum (SCERT, 2024). As Schools Director, Divya not only directed her school teams to integrate the Student Vision into their in-school interventions, but attempted to help employees incorporate the values into their professional practice.

In early January, during school winter break, Divya called all three Delhi-based school teams to the Clear-Space office for a two-day “step-back” retreat. As we sat down to begin, Clear-Space co-founder Baan explained the importance of the retreat, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast” (Fieldnote, January 2020). He told us Divya had prepared a set of reflective exercises to help us explore the NGO's Student Vision values and develop Clear-Space's “culture” of self-development through self-reflection. In one exercise, Divya laid printouts of each of the values (EMPATHY; CREATIVITY; etc.) at various spots in the room, and guided us to stand next to, “the value we most associate with right now” (Fieldnote, January 2020). Next, Divya invited us to make a collaborative artwork based on this value with whoever else had also chosen this word, and after ten minutes of artmaking, asked each group to share about their process.

This vignette highlights Clear-Space's intention for staff to develop the same SEL skills that they are expected to teach to children in school. In the vignette that follows, I show how Clear-Space in-school leader Arushi struggles to practice at least two of these values, empathy and curiosity, as they train juniors to develop the individualized, responsiblized mindset supposedly necessary to succeed in neoliberal culture.

In March 2019, Arushi was about to begin her second year as Clear-Space's School Leader in Dilip Vihar SDMC primary school in South Delhi, and I came for one of my first visits.[7] As we sat around child-sized desks in a concrete classroom, Arushi prepared her in-school NGO team for the upcoming academic year. After an hour reviewing the curriculum, Arushi began questioning her two juniors, twenty-year-old Suraj, and nineteen-year-old Kasak, on their professional and personal habits:

Arushi: Suraj won't speak up in meetings.
Me: Why don't you like to speak up in meetings, Suraj?
Suraj: I don't like to get questioned on my question; I worry that I'll mess up if they question me further.
Arushi: It's *your* problem, not speaking up, Suraj, no-one else's.

Kasak thinks we won't accept she has a boyfriend. [To Kasak] But whose problem is it? Yours! Don't let society tell you. You've internalized values, and now you go against them, but you feel shame. Why don't you value your own feelings in this case of being in love? You're using your parents as an excuse not to do what you feel.

[to the whole group] If we don't reflect, how can we teach kids to reflect? Suraj, if you don't want to ask questions because you feel judged, then fine, don't ask, but at least if you reflect you know why, and won't blame others. I lived my whole life blaming others, then I learnt to reflect, and now I'm here. I want these kids to reflect on their situations and who they are, otherwise they'll have miserable lives.[8] (Fieldnote, March 2019)

The above dialogue displays how Arushi's neoliberal subjectivity prevents her practicing empathy and curiosity with her juniors. Key to neoliberal ideology is individual responsibilisation (Rose, 1998). By characterizing Suraj's discomfort at "speaking up" in meetings as his own "problem," Arushi individualizes Suraj's emotional condition. Similar to the brusque pedagogical style of Prashant, Arushi leaves no room for the "reflection" she so adamantly defends, and instead presents "not blaming others" as an unquestionable necessity.

Neoliberal ideologies see the proliferation of individual freedom based on one's own attention to self as a moral good (Brown, 2015; Gooptu, 2013; Muehlebach, 2012). In her speech to Kasak, Arushi diagnoses that Kasak has internalized "society's values" at the cost of valuing her own feelings. Arushi's distinction reifies the "self" as something distinct from "society," a sign that a "bounded" notion of self structures her conception, and one linked to a positivist ontology that so commonly undergirds neoliberal thought. The neoliberal angle of Arushi's discourse is further visible in her policing of Kasak on exactly which feelings she should value. Unproductive feelings like "shame" are devalued and seemingly liberatory feelings like "love" valorized (Hochschild, 1983; Probyn, 2005). Again, Arushi denies Kasak space to reflect on her emotions, and instead didactically teaches a neoliberal right and wrong. Indeed, it is this impulse of didacticism that blocks Arushi from enacting the ClearSpace values of empathy and curiosity that would create the conditions for Kasak and Suraj to practice self-reflection, a mode of inquiry that she herself proclaims can liberate individuals and prevent them from having "miserable lives."

On a personal level, Arushi appears caught in a similar dilemma to Prashant. Her neoliberal subjectivity directs her to seek both professional and emotional fulfillment through work. Her acts of professional-personal coaching towards Suraj and Kasak seem to be teaching them to develop a neoliberal self that develops resilience and independence as "skills" to employ both in professional scenarios (speaking up in meetings) and personal affairs (managing social expectations around pre-marital romance). But Arushi was not the only ClearSpace leader who expressed frustration at her attempts to cultivate social emotional "skills" in the team members she managed. Divya, the Schools Director, had similar laments while managing Arushi herself. When I interviewed Divya on her experience of being Arushi's line manager, she said:

> ***Divya:*** I don't want to manage people; I think people should manage themselves. I want to enable people to manage themselves.
>
> You just have to give people the skills of self-discipline, vulnerability, asking for support, and that's it. Arushi is extremely capable … the challenge is that Arushi takes too much on her plate, and she doesn't ask for support. (Interview, February 2020)

Although Arushi and Divya both want their workplace juniors to "manage themselves" and learn not to "blame others," Divya does not expect this self-management to mean total self-reliance. Perhaps based on her privileged upbringing, continued family support, and caste status, Divya seems to understand "self-management" not as absolute self-reliance, but as including the ability to know one's limitations and know when to ask for help. In the section below, I argue that Arushi's more radical conception of self-reliance—and her methods of coaching and self-presentation structured by it—are shaped by her own journey of survival as a person with marginalized experience within neoliberal culture, and her own struggle to navigate the dilemma of vulnerability embedded in the leadership discourse of entrepreneurial education NGOs.

WHO GETS TO BECOME A LEADER OF DELHI'S EDUCATION NGOs?

Based on an analysis of her life history, it appears that Arushi's experience of being unsupported by her parents, teachers, and husband led her to interpret the neoliberal injunction to self-manage as total self-reliance. Arushi's story is interesting because, despite the structural conditions of patriarchy, casteism, and wealth inequality that shaped her earlier life, she developed an entrepreneurial subjectivity and followed her “passions” in the way Prashant hoped his schoolboys might. That is, she quit her corporate job and joined the non-profit education reform movement. However, in terms of her success as a School Leader at Clear-Space, her story doesn't end well.

In August 2019, Divya decided that Suraj would no longer operate solely in Arushi's primary school but would share his time with another Clear-Space school nearby. This move seemed to hurt Arushi, as visible in the following vignette.

It was lunch time, and the Dilip Vihar team, Arushi, Kasak, and Tricia—the Assistant School Leader—shared food as Suraj strolled into the classroom. Arushi and Tricia immediately teased Suraj that he would “stoop so low” as to visit them. “You clearly prefer working at Ram Nagri [the other school], so why not admit it,” said Arushi. Suraj attempted a balanced reply, but as soon as he said a positive word about the other school Arushi and Tricia hooted in delight, “*Bol diya! Bol diya!”* [He said it! He admitted it!]. When Suraj left, I asked Arushi and Tricia why they thought Suraj preferred working in the other school. Tricia suggested it was because they “spoon-feed” him, to which Arushi replied, “I used to spoon-feed Suraj last year, but then he said he wanted more independence, so I stopped.” (Fieldnote, August 2019).

Arushi's teasing indicates the resentment she felt at Suraj's rejection. But to better understand the dynamics between Suraj and Arushi, we must know a little more about Suraj's family situation. At the time, Suraj lived with his father, mother, and sister who was engaged to be married. Suraj's salary, despite being one of the lowest at Clear-Space, was a huge contribution to his family's overall income. His family had put a lot of money into wedding preparations and had become financially unstable. Furthermore, his sister's fiancé's mother was in intensive care, and if she died, the wedding would have to be postponed for a year and new preparations paid for. I learnt this not from Suraj, but from Arushi, who Suraj continued to speak to about personal matters even as their professional relationship became strained.

In my analysis, Suraj prioritized keeping his job at Clear-Space over aspiring to become a neoliberal subject who tries to self-actualize through work. Like Prashant's schoolboys in the section above who favor secure, non-entrepreneurial government jobs, Suraj's need for money was greater than his need for self-development. He may have sought more “independence” at one point, as Arushi reports, but at this moment he needed secure employment to protect his family. While Prashant dismissed the interest in money shown by the financially marginalized schoolboys he addressed in his speech, Arushi was not so naïve. Perhaps her own experience of marginalization helped her empathize with Suraj's need. Empathetic or otherwise, Arushi's defensive teasing of Suraj reveals the hurt she felt at Suraj's choice to continue to rely on her as an emotional confidant while preferring the professional leadership style of other Clear-Space managers, such as the one who “spoon-fed” him.

Arushi's pain only increased as Divya further removed Suraj from her influence. In January 2020, Divya decided that Suraj would report directly to her at head office, and no longer be managed by Arushi at all. Again, instead of expressing her pain to her colleagues—and displaying the vulnerability that her manager Divya encouraged—Arushi found other more indirect means to process her emotions. A vignette:

It was after school in February 2020 and Kasak was scribbling in her notebook. Arushi asked what she was doing, and Kasak replied, “Making a bucket list.” Arushi told her to share, but before Kasak had the chance, Arushi decided to name her own bucket list:

1. seeing Metallica live
2. skydiving
3. standing up to people and telling them what I really think

Arushi paused and a smirk melted her face.

Arushi: But I've done that now, I've done that with Divya. I confronted her about her lie.
Me: What lie?
Arushi: They said they had already told us that they would be transferring Suraj out of school and having him report to the office. They said they told us that in the meeting at the start of January, but they didn't. They told me to check with Kasak who was in the meeting too, Kasak doesn't remember. But I do—they didn't mention it. So, when I last saw them, I called them out on this lie.

[Arushi paused, then added]:

> I realize now that I have a lot of privilege. I'm someone who stands up for things, who fights for things, who pushes for what they believe. (Fieldnote, February 2020)

Arushi's pain is clearly signified by her dramatic telling of the conflict with Divya over Suraj. What is important to my argument, though, is Arushi's inability to express this loss. Similar to Prashant's petulant refusal to express his emotions to the boys ("we all have struggles"), and Baan's bombastic proclamation of professional devotion ("I'm 100% Clear-Space"), Arushi cultivates a melodramatic narrative in which Divya is the villain who "lied," and she is the one with "privilege" because she "pushes for what [she] believes[s]." Neoliberal subjectivity, it seems, provokes those who attempt it to performatively recuperate a sense of self which has become unstable in its vacillation between its desire for professional security and emotional fulfillment. Furthermore, in this case, Arushi cannot blame her history of neglect for her inability to perform as a "self-managed" subject, because, as we learnt from Prashant, both the rich and poor have "struggles," and entrepreneurial citizens must not blame circumstance for failure. Instead, Arushi must identify a separate difference between her and Divya: she is a moral person who "stands up for things," Divya is someone who "lied."

A few months after the above exchange, Arushi quit her role as School Leader and left Clear-Space altogether. Perhaps the narrative above was her way of making sense of the impossibility of inhabiting Feher's "fused" neoliberal subject (Feher, 2009). Through mentoring Suraj, Arushi was afforded the chance to fulfill both professional duty and emotional connection. On losing Suraj, Arushi was faced with a dilemma: she could either retain her professional role at Clear-Space without option for the emotional fulfillment of personal leadership, or could quit, lose her financial security, and claim the moral high ground. Arushi's anxiety here sheds light on why she displayed such fierce didacticism in the earlier coaching of her mentees. Arushi, Suraj, and Kasak all come from non-elite families. Arushi's experience of navigating the personal and professional in liberalizing India has hardened her to the reality of how difficult it is to succeed as someone with experiences of social and economic marginalization. This hardening seems to have induced her to extreme acts of discursive self-defense: she avoided a "miserable life" by learning not to "blame others"; she has "a lot of privilege" because she maintains integrity in front of "lies" despite the pain she feels at no longer acting as mentor to Suraj. These acts, I argue, are those of a marginalized subject trying to survive in a neoliberal culture.

Furthermore, each Suraj, Arushi, and Divya have different responses to the neoliberal demand to self-manage based on their differing experiences of marginalization. Suraj responds by refusing the imperative to self-actualize in the workplace, and consents to redeployment rather than risk losing his job by expressing his emotions to other managers beyond Arushi. Arushi has carefully crafted a narrative of self-reliance as method of surviving in the neoliberal culture of education development but is so wedded to the narrative that she can neither ask for support from Divya, nor express her emotions directly. Divya's experience of social and financial security seems to have allowed her to interpret self-management as the process of understanding one's capacity and having the confidence to ask for help when needed, but despite providing day-long reflection workshops for her team, she fails to understand how Arushi and Suraj's experiences of social and financial marginalization impact their “capacity” to be vulnerable.

THE COSTS OF LOSING GOOD LEADERS

Clear-Space's mission is to improve education provision to marginalized communities to enhance social equality in India. However, the organization operates within an entrepreneurial culture that subjectifies individuals as “human capital” who must continually account for their intractably entangled moral and professional development (Feher, 2009). Ultimately, in this case study, one result of operating in this culture is that of the two women who are aspiring leaders of education reform, the one with experience of marginalization leaves the organization, and the one from a more structurally privileged background remains. Despite Clear-Space's mission to improve social equality, the specific relational dynamics induced by the neoliberal culture of the education development discourse result in the organization's failure to incorporate an individual from a marginalized background who aspires to become an educational leader. As Ajantha Subramanian makes clear in her analysis of the Brahmin domination of supposedly “meritocratic” IITs, caste and class continue to shape who succeeds and who fails in contemporary India (Subramanian, 2019).

A recent surge of ethnographies of the education industry in India recognize the affective weight of learning how to “aspire” on the marginalized youth who are the supposed beneficiaries of education reform (Mathew & Lukose, 2020). My case study of Teach-Them affiliated NGOs provides a glimpse of how a similar affective burden is carried by at least one ambitious educator who administers these “pedagogies of aspiration.” Just as the beneficiaries of pedagogies of aspiration can face anxiety and precarity as they attempt to retain their aspirations for a middle-class life (Desai, 2023), Arushi's story shows the potential consequences of aspiring to educational leadership for those without middle-class privilege. Beyond Arushi's personal concerns, her departure from NGO leadership may also have short- and long-term effects on Clear-Space's capacity to meet their aims. Not long after Arushi left the NGO, Clear-Space's partnership with Dilip Vihar primary school ended, suggesting that Arushi herself was vital to Clear-Space operations in the school. Furthermore, drawing on my ethnographic data displaying Arushi and Prashant in leadership mode, it seems a key method of leadership is to use one's own life story as a pedagogical tool. Despite both Prashant and Arushi's complications in their attempts to emotionally connect with juniors, Arushi maintained a connection to Suraj largely because she related to him as a marginalized subject: she understood his financial and family troubles. If non-elite leaders like Arushi are pushed out of the system, and only wealthier, upper-caste ones like Divya, Prashant and Baan remain, there will be a lack of role models to whom non-elite children can relate.

Educators like Arushi who have lacked emotional and financial support due to structural conditions such as patriarchy, casteism, and unequal access to education respond to the

neoliberal dilemma of vulnerability in ways that become their undoing. They follow the lessons that Prashant sets out in his speech: they accept the universality of suffering, and in the case of Arushi, develop a radical interpretation of self-reliance as self-protection that prevents the intimate exchanges needed to meet both emotional and professional needs through the same daily practice. In this way, Arushi cannot be incorporated as a leader of an entrepreneurial education industry which fails to deliver on its promise of inclusivity signaled by the SEL values of empathy, collaboration, and curiosity that it promotes. In short, education NGOs lose good leaders when they ignore how experiences of marginalization influence the capacity to “self-manage.”

CONCLUSION

Prashant's speech, Arushi's coaching, and Divya's management style are all attempts at neoliberal subjectification within entrepreneurial culture: subjects are induced to see themselves as empowered, self-reliant, self-disciplined agents who release themselves from the complexity of cultural politics and learn to “valorize and moralize the individual pursuit of self” (Gooptu, 2013, p. 7). But Arushi's story shows what can happen to NGOs who induce staff to aspire to the complex “fused self” of the neoliberal “human capital subject” (Feher, 2009) but fail to acknowledge that histories of marginalization influence a subject's capacity to “manage themselves.” In sum, they lose good leaders. Furthermore, these NGOs are not passive recipients of this neoliberal culture, but embed notions of self-management into the social emotional learning curriculums which they administer to staff and beneficiaries alike. The dilemmas of vulnerability faced by Baan, Prashant and Arushi in Delhi occur in part because, despite staff training days like the one led by Divya above, the entrepreneurial culture of speed, growth, and “impact” leaves little space for employees to build mutual trust and practice the social emotional learning curriculums that could allow for safer spaces of vulnerable sharing to unfold. And while there is a growing body of literature on the psychic effects of entrepreneurial subjectification in professional contexts across the globe (Chowdhury, 2022; Scharff, 2016), we need more ethnographic, contextual evidence to understand how the demand to be authentically emotional at the workplace can support or hinder organizations to deliver social justice.

To return to education per se: in her analysis of U.S. higher education, Bonnie Urciuoli names neoliberalism as a cultural belief system, in which the “self-controlling” person is the “epitome of the ideal worker” that universities must produce (2011, p. 165). Teach-Them network NGOs are also oriented to producing future citizens who will thrive in India's growing neoliberal, entrepreneurial society and economy (Balagopalan, 2022; Gooptu, 2013; Irani, 2019; Subramanian, 2020). Critics of neoliberal education reforms in the U.S. (Apple, 2006; Giroux, 2014) and the U.K. (Ball, 2016b; Reay, 2017) have shown how such reforms have done little to address how educations institutions reproduce class inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), and how widening the provision of quality education does not necessitate social change (Burke, 2012). Indeed, scholars have long argued that widening participation to education in India without deeper understanding of class and caste power can have violent effects (Gopinath, 2017; Jeffrey et al., 2008). There is no reason to assume providing social emotional learning curriculums to non-elite communities will have a different impact. Furthermore, as the Government of India implements recent policy shifts and rolls out social emotional learning curriculums across the country (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020; NCERT, 2023), researchers must pay close attention not just to how these curriculums might negatively influence beneficiaries, but how the pedagogies of aspiration they contain might negatively impact any *educators* from marginalized backgrounds who seek to deliver them.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Despite the recent call to reclaim the term “subaltern” in favor of “marginalized” (Balagopalan, 2022), I use the terms “marginalized backgrounds” and “experiences of marginalization” throughout the article. I make this choice because to me “subaltern” indicates a more fixed subject position, whereas describing someone as having “experiences of marginalization” recognizes they may have also had experiences of privilege via other held positionalities.

[2] Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

[3] These are secondary schools run by the Department of Education (DoE) at Delhi state level.

[4] Prashant's speech was delivered in “Hinglish” (a mix of Hindi and English). I've translated most quotations into English for readability, and only left in Hindi where the original meaning lacks a single direct translation.

[5] Cf. Mary Ann Chacko's analysis of an Indian Student Police Cadet programme where “serving” is valued over “earning” (Chacko, 2020).

[6] Caste reservations exist in many states and in many forms, for an overview of caste reservation in India see *Caste Based Reservation in India* (Pasricha, 2006).

[7] South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) is the governing body for all government-run primary schools in south Delhi.

[8] This conversation took place predominantly in English, with smatterings of Hindi and Hinglish (Hindi and English), which I have translated into English.

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