



**A University of Sussex PhD thesis**

Available online via Sussex Research Online:

<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/>

This thesis is protected by copyright which belongs to the author.

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Please visit Sussex Research Online for more information and further details

# **Purposed- Leadership:**

**neoliberal  
subjectivity and  
India's  
education social  
entrepreneurs**

Rich Thornton

PhD candidate – Social Anthropology

University of Sussex, May 2022

**Statement**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be,  
submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of  
any other degree.

Signature:.....

.....

## *Table of Contents*

Formal Acknowledgment .....	6
<b><i>Abstract</i>.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b><i>Introduction</i> .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The self-as-locus-of-social-change: an autoethnographic introduction</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Vipassana and technologies of self .....	9
Me, the anthropologist, a member of the Movement.....	11
<b>The Indian Education Reform Movement and the global education discourse</b> .....	<b>14</b>
Indian Education Reform Movement and neoliberalism .....	14
Primary school provision in India: a short history .....	15
Teach-Them, Delhi, and Public-Private Partnership schools.....	17
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Skills, social-emotional learning, and stable selves .....	18
<b>Neoliberal subjectivity in India</b> .....	<b>20</b>
A neoliberal technology of self in colonial India? .....	20
The ‘autonomous’ psychological self and neoliberalism .....	22
The normative ‘enterprising citizen’ of post-liberalisation India .....	24
<b>Middle-class India: morality, education, and social entrepreneurship</b> .....	<b>25</b>
Self-making and meritocracy in the Indian middle class.....	25
Education and the Indian middle-class .....	27
Social entrepreneurship: a new moral mission for liberalisation’s children.....	29
The social entrepreneur of education .....	31
Family – a concept and a practice .....	33
<b>Relational Ontology and Affect Theory</b> .....	<b>35</b>
Why relational ontology? .....	35
What is relational ontology? .....	36
Affect theory.....	38
Cruel optimism: the subject position of an education social entrepreneur? .....	41
<b><i>Methodology and Overview</i> .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>44</b>
The long road to my fieldsite .....	44
My role as educator-researcher .....	46
Multi-sited ethnography in one city .....	49
Storied lives and biographical anthropology.....	50
Impressionist ethnography.....	52
Ethics and affect theory.....	53
Participatory Action Research .....	54
Autoethnography .....	55
Positionality .....	56
Ethics again .....	58
<b>Overview of the Ethnographic Chapters</b> .....	<b>59</b>
The four ethnographic chapters of the thesis.....	59
Chapter order and narrative arcs .....	60
<b><i>Chapter 1.</i> .....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b><i>Teach-Them: the origins of purposed-leadership</i>.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Introduction to Chapter 1</b> .....	<b>63</b>
Overview of the Chapter .....	63
Framing Teach-Them.....	64

<b>The Teach-Them training Centre.....</b>	<b>67</b>
My arrival at the Teach-Them Centre 2017 .....	67
The Opening Days of the Centre: the group and the self.....	68
The messianic culture of Teach-Them.....	71
Positivity as policy.....	73
Teach-Them Centre: the production of ‘collectively oriented individualism’?.....	76
Self-belief as central resource .....	78
The self as the locus of social change.....	80
<b>A glimpse of life after Teach-Them .....</b>	<b>84</b>
Vignette A: The difference between Teach-Them and government-trained teachers.....	84
Vignette B: ‘What are your values, bhaiya?’ .....	86
<b>Purposed-Leadership and Neoliberal Subjectivity .....</b>	<b>90</b>
The value of purposed-leadership.....	90
Teach-Them’s fantasy of self-actualisation and the tension of neoliberal subjectivity.....	93
Teach-Them: a postscript.....	95
<b>Chapter 2. ....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b><i>Leadership, Individualism, Family: Stories of Arushi and Divya .....</i></b>	<b><i>97</i></b>
<b>Introduction to Chapter 2.....</b>	<b>97</b>
Overview of the Chapter .....	97
Vignette A: The school – bodies on parade.....	98
Clear-Space and Dilip Vihar government primary: a PPP school .....	99
<b>Arushi.....</b>	<b>101</b>
Arushi: A Biography .....	101
Vignette B: Arushi as mother-coach.....	106
Arushi between two families.....	112
Vignette C: Arushi as strategizing <i>bahu</i> : the realpolitik of school hierarchy .....	114
<b>Divya .....</b>	<b>118</b>
Divya: a biography .....	118
Clear-Space’s ‘Student Vision’ .....	120
Vignette D: The 2050 game .....	122
<b>Family and Responsibilisation .....</b>	<b>126</b>
Family and purposed-leadership .....	126
Leader not a manager .....	128
Shut up and do something! .....	131
Conclusion: gendered purposed-leadership? .....	133
<b>Chapter 3. ....</b>	<b>135</b>
<b><i>Life as a Social Entrepreneur of Education in Delhi .....</i></b>	<b><i>135</i></b>
<b>Introduction to Chapter 3.....</b>	<b>135</b>
Overview of the Chapter .....	135
Baan’s method for achieving purposed-leadership .....	136
The value of affective research .....	136
Baan’s biography in brief.....	137
<b>Baan: An Ethnographic Analysis (a).....</b>	<b>138</b>
Prologue: All work and no play makes Baan a good boy? .....	138
Vignette A: The Social Entrepreneur Circle .....	139
Vignette B: The ‘Compassionate Systems’ workshop .....	141
Using affective intensity to understand purposed-leadership.....	145
<b>Ethnographic Interlude: Desiring Data, Quantitative Personhood .....</b>	<b>149</b>

Vignette C: Baan's desperation for data, and the logic of expansion .....	149
<b>Becoming a 'devil' of the education space .....</b>	<b>152</b>
Introduction to the 'devil' vignettes .....	152
Vignette D: The faux-pas of capitalist language .....	153
Vignette E: The impossibility of being 100% ... and embracing the antihero .....	155
Vignette F: Fame as emancipation – or a relation of cruel optimism? .....	160
<b>Outro: feminism, masculinity, and purposed-leadership .....</b>	<b>164</b>
Vignette G: Deepika's Jeans – policing bodies for the cause .....	164
Self-as-NGO, quantitative personhood, masculinity, and me .....	166
<b>Chapter 4. ....</b>	<b>169</b>
<b><i>Purposed-Leadership as Self-Actualisation, Self-Actualisation as Social Change?.....</i></b>	<b>169</b>
<b>Introduction to Chapter 4.....</b>	<b>169</b>
Overview of Chapter .....	169
<b>Prashant as a person .....</b>	<b>171</b>
Prashant: An Ethnographic Poem.....	171
Entrepreneurialism as redemption .....	181
Prashant the changemaker.....	184
The 'person' as bounded and autonomous .....	185
<b>Reifying resilience, vicarious emancipation .....</b>	<b>186</b>
Rupali: a snapshot .....	186
Resilience and purposed-leadership .....	188
<b>Teaching purposed-leadership.....</b>	<b>190</b>
The Warren and the Tomb: non-government schools and government primaries.....	190
Down the rabbit hole with Prashant .....	192
Prashant's Speech: the ethics of biography as parable.....	193
Prashant's philosophy of self-reliance .....	197
The moralism produced by desiring purposed-leadership .....	199
Prashant's philosophy of self.....	202
Conclusion: the tension of the social-entrepreneur .....	203
<b><i>Post-Script: how I want what they have ...</i> .....</b>	<b>205</b>
Moment A: Arushi's resilience .....	205
Moment B: Divya's role .....	206
Moment C: Baan's access and power.....	209
Moment D: Prashant's faith .....	211
Reflection.....	213
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>214</b>
Desiring self-management and self-discipline .....	216
The anxiety of being 'valued' .....	218
Consistent Selves – or relational flexibility? .....	220
Responsibilisation and structural inequality .....	222
Valuing Teach-Them .....	225
<b>Epilogue: Anthropology, relationality, and method .....</b>	<b>226</b>
Partible selves, relational ontologies .....	226
Affective intensity as ethnographic method par excellence? .....	228
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>230</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>239</b>

### **Formal Acknowledgment**

This thesis would not have been possible without my Studentship (2017-2021) with the SeNSS STP, funded by the ESRC.

[See Appendix 1 for my personal acknowledgments]

## *Abstract*

The Indian Education Reform Movement (Ball 2016a) is a multi-sited network of non-government organisations (NGOs) aiming to ensure the provision of quality schooling across India. The Movement weaves together diverse spiritual, political and cultural discourses – from neoliberal meritocracy, management leadership theory, neo-Buddhism, and Gandhian *sewa* (service) – to produce a narrative in which the *individual* is the trope through which social change occurs.

At the forefront of the Movement are university-educated middle-class individuals who launch ‘start-up’ social enterprises to counter specific ‘problems’ with universal education provision. This thesis explores the founders and entrepreneurially-minded employees of these new Delhi-based education NGOs. I explore how a focus on self – self-awareness, self-discipline, self-management – becomes central to how these educators envision school reform. Here, the self is the locus of social change, *leadership* is the disposition to value, and education interventions must direct charges to develop their leadership ‘skills’. Leadership is equated with self-discipline, self-confidence, and self-belief, and is important for two reasons: (1) leaders are not beneficiaries: if every child is a leader, they will lead themselves out of their own social or economic deprivation; (2) only leaders have the self-discipline to practise self-reflection and discover their purpose within. Educators and children must locate a personalised purpose and develop the ‘skill’ of leadership to realise this purpose.

Hence, I introduce the term *purposed-leadership* as the central organising concept through which I explore the emotional lifeworlds and professional interventions of Delhi’s start-up NGO educationalists. As liberalisation’s (grand)children, middle-class graduates join education NGOs, learn to value purposed-leadership, and discover *social entrepreneurship* as the method by which they can both practise purposed-leadership and develop a self-image in which they are impactfully educating the nation.

I explore how this preoccupation with purposed-leadership produces a specific type of neoliberal subject who is caught between the desire to manifest an authentic, inner self, and the pressure to succeed in the free market world of grants, funding, and sponsorship which ‘start-



up' NGOs require. The affective tension felt by these entrepreneurial educationalists becomes a relation of cruel optimism: their desire for sovereignty and autonomy (purposed-leadership) pulls against their desire for community, solidarity, i.e. their authentic relational self. Concomitantly, I explore how a focus on self-reflection and self-management leaves educators blind to the historical and social structures which continue to reproduce inequality in India.

## *Introduction*

\*

### **The self-as-locus-of-social-change: an autoethnographic introduction**

*The self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities.*

Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari

#### **Vipassana and technologies of self**

dyuti laughed when she heard I'm opening my thesis with my experience of *vipassana*. A white man goes to India to write about selfhood and 'finds himself' on a Buddhist meditation course? It's so achingly cliché and self-conscious that I could think of no better way to begin an ethnography where I intimately explore the subjectivity and selfhood of others. My Indian educationalist friends and I are all searching for some kind of self-actualisation, and perhaps the promise of 'oneness' sold to Westerners through neo-Buddhism is as alluring as the power of the autonomous subject displayed to the middle class of post-liberalisation India.

In 2016, I travelled to Bodhgaya to spend ten days in a silent retreat of *vipassana* meditation. The retreat was run by disciples of vipassana guru S.N. Goenka who taught Goenka's specific method of meditation, allegedly based on original teachings from the Buddha (see Goenka and Hart 2000).

In vipassana meditation, a person learns to notice the slightest sensations of the body and then practises showing no physical response to these sensations. One key exercise is to sit crossed-legged for a full hour without moving; after about 45 minutes the pain in one's thighs is excruciating, but the neophyte must accept the sensation (pain) and not show any reaction (they

must not grimace, sigh, or move their legs to release the tension). S.N. Goenka's Theravada Buddhist treats all sensations with equanimity: they accept whatever sensations they feel and refuse to react. There is an ethic that structures this practice: if the conscious mind becomes powerful enough to control bodily reactions to sensations, then there is no danger of a body reacting violently to painful stimuli – and therefore no danger of committing violence onto others, human or otherwise. The Buddhist who is stung by a mosquito will not reach out to kill it, instead they will accept the pain and use their conscious mind to overcome it.

The aim of vipassana is to overcome *samskara*<sup>1</sup> (cravings and aversions): to release yourself from all desire, whether negative or positive, and thereby avoid the suffering caused when desires are not met. By releasing yourself from desire, you release yourself from intention. The by-product of having no intention is that you cause no violence: you actively desire nothing, so you have no need to manipulate the world around you. Once released from *samskara*, the only chance you will come to cause violence is through involuntary bodily reactions (you may still swat a mosquito without thinking), and so your mind must teach your body not to react to sensorial stimulation. The experienced Buddhist can learn how not to shiver in the cold.

This vipassana technique – observing sensations in the body and practising the composure not to react to those sensations – is what Foucault might call a 'technology of self'.

Technologies of self ... permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 2000:225)

Trained primarily as a historian, Foucault uses the biography of two historical figures – 4th century monk John Cassian and the Roman philosopher Seneca – to explore different techniques used by individuals in their attempts to control their subjectivity. Both men, Foucault argues, use 'technologies of self-examination' as means of self-improvement. Cassian interrogates his present thoughts to better train them to contemplate God; Seneca journals his past actions of the day to see how well they match his idealised 'rules of conduct'.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Samskara* is an ancient term prevalent in different Indian cultural and religious discourses, from Hinduism to Buddhism. Here I used the term *samskara* in the way it was taught to me during my personal experience of vipassana.

While reading about Foucault's 'technologies of self' I was struck by how well it fit with my experience of vipassana. Technologies of the self demand repetitive daily practices that produce an individual's ethical orientation. Neither Cassian nor Seneca rely on a strict *moral* framework to achieve their spiritual or humanistic goals; they instead recognise 'the good' in the immanent *practice* of daily reflection and self-awareness.<sup>2</sup> And although the precept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) was offered to us as the ideal that can be reached through vipassana training, it was a value entangled with the transcendent monist cosmology of Buddhism and not taken as a moral law laid down by a god.<sup>3</sup>

Technologies of self interest me because they allow us to imagine how a focus on self-examination can be mobilised as a communal project that produces collective good. It is precisely the belief that self-change can effect social change that structures the education reforms and educationalists' subjectivities at the heart of my ethnography. The ethnographic weight of my thesis shows how the promise of a collective good arising from a focus on self can result in the production of 'neoliberal' subjectivities which can be 'cruel' to inhabit.

### **Me, the anthropologist, a member of the Movement**

I read my auto-ethnographic experience of vipassana through Foucault's theory of subjectivity to prologue the entanglement of theme/method which has coloured the journey of my anthropology PhD. I enrolled on the 10-day vipassana retreat primarily to see how it would feel. Would I gain some self-knowledge? Would I learn a new life practice that helped me become more empathetic to others' suffering, more aware of how to live non-violently, more sensitive to the sensory messages passed between my brain and body in daily life? In other words, I hoped vipassana would bring me closer to self-actualisation. Not that I would be 'converted' to Buddhism and devote all my time to seeking enlightenment, but that I would develop greater appreciation of how humans seek meaningful ethical practice in their daily life – as an anthropologist is wont to do – and to *feel* the contours of a new temporary subjectivity (silent, unstimulated, singular) – as a participant-observer.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Joel Robbins' (2013) landmark paper for the anthropological value of the term 'the good'

<sup>3</sup> In the Theravada Buddhism of which S.N.Goenka's vipassana meditation method is a part, the adherent comes to know that one's own body is merely a material piece of the universe like all things, and so to cause harm to another earthly thing is tantamount to harming oneself. I will come back to the links between Buddhism and the ethico-onto-epistemology of new materialism in my methodology section below.

When I embarked on this PhD journey I was drawn to the interdisciplinary: I wanted to speak with and speak within the disciplines of anthropology and education. I wanted to do research that would inform contemporary anthropological debates on neoliberal subjectivity in India, and debates concerning pedagogy and philosophy in the global development of education. As things have turned out, and in some part by having two anthropologists of South Asia as supervisors (neither anthropologists of education), my thesis is predominantly a contribution to anthropological debates on subjectivity. Nevertheless, my primary relation to the research informants of this ethnography is as a fellow educator and *member of the Indian Education Reform Movement*. In my methodology section I fully articulate the genealogy of how I came to inhabit this subject position, but what is key to know from the start is that the ‘I’ in this text is an intellectual-emotional assemblage, a scientist-ethical subject who cannot disentangle their academic analysis from their ethico-political subjectivity. My attempts to analyse the subjectivity of entrepreneurial educators in Delhi’s start-up NGOs are always shadowed by my own anxiety to work towards global education reform.

Central to my analysis of the IERM is the concept of the self-as-locus-of-social change. Before I begin to discuss how that concept overcodes the IERM (and hinders the political and educational aims of the movement), I want to accept that I too very much believe that the self can be *a* locus of social change. Self-change, I believe, *can* be a part of the social justice movement, and my exploration of vipassana was in part an attempt to do just that: change the world by changing myself.

One central observation of this thesis is that the IERM produce an ahistorical, apolitical, *individualist* notion of selfhood which aligns with the instrumentalism of neoliberal logic – where changing the self becomes *the only* method of social change. But just because the general effect of the IERM discourse is to ignore socially-produced subjectivity doesn’t mean individual educators are not sensitive to historical and sociological readings of the self.

From the outset I want to make this clear: I differentiate between the discourse of the Indian Education Reform Movement and the persons who operate within it. During this research project, I have found the discourse upsetting: I have found that it promotes a naive, neoliberal vision of the world in which each individual has the power to prosper and succeed regardless of their historical and social position. As a politically-oriented educationalist myself, it pains

me to see how this discourse subjectifies young people into a lifeworld which promises happiness, fulfilment and meaning, but at times produces competition, resentment, jealousy, and isolation.

My discomfort with the politics and philosophy of the IERM discourse is, however, seasoned by the love and respect I feel for the educators who work within it. This thesis provides an intimate display of the day-to-day personal and ethical struggles suffered by educators whose dedication to furthering social equality in India far surpasses my own. The critical thrust of this thesis is aimed at the *discourse* that sets the parameters for education provision in India, not at the educators themselves.

And finally, this thesis is not actually about teaching children technologies of self, it is about what it feels like for social entrepreneurs to practise technologies of self and the fantasy of seeing these technologies as emancipatory. It is about how *purposed-leadership* becomes something IERM educationalists desire, and how desiring this way of being sheds light on the neoliberal imaginary of the IERM. I opened the section with my experience of vipassana, because vipassana's power of seduction, like any intensive spiritual practice, lies in its promise of pure purpose. This thesis explores the illusion of pure self-actualisation, the illusion of discovering a clear purpose 'deep within', precisely because I share the same fantasy as the education 'revolutionaries' who inhabit my ethnographic pages. We both desire simple straightforward routes to social equality that cost us only hard work and determination. And my thesis is merely a contribution that says: it's more complicated than that. Perhaps both my educationalist friends and I are articulations of some ideal 21st century middle-class self: one who desires an ethical role in the world that does not threaten its own emotional and material security.

Anyway. Let me now introduce both the people and discourse of the Indian Education Reform Movement and then locate it within the history of neoliberal India and the morality of India's middle-class.

# The Indian Education Reform Movement and the global education discourse

## Indian Education Reform Movement and neoliberalism

The Indian Education Reform Movement (IERM) is a term used by sociologist of education Stephen Ball to describe a ‘loose network’ of people interested in changing education provision in India, and who are ‘serving as a movement’ (Ball 2016a:556). Ball adopted the term from an interlocutor and took it as ‘a focus for the discussion of policy networks and policy mobilities’ in India (549).<sup>4</sup> For me, the IERM is a helpful category through which to understand the relationship between neoliberal discourses of ‘global’ education and the specific entrepreneurial educators who I studied during my fieldwork.

A quick look at the names of the corporations and organisations Ball notes in his paper – McKinsey, Omidyar Network, Dell Foundation – offers a clue about the rationality and politics of the IERM. Consultancy, ‘philanthropic’ investment firms, and the charity arms of tech giants set the tone for what kind of education is valued as part of this movement. Ball (2012) – and others (Lingard and Rizvi 2010; Verger, Novelli, and Altinyelken 2015; Gray, O’Regan, and Wallace 2021) – insist that the current international networks of education development carry a distinct ‘neoliberal imaginary’.

My exploration of the term ‘neoliberalism’ will develop over the course of this thesis, but for the purposes of describing the neoliberal imaginary of global education development, it is helpful to provide a recent Foucauldian reading of the term:

Neoliberals contend that domains not previously conceived of in market terms can be reframed according to such analysis. Thus, objects and activities such as education, kinship, and child-rearing can be analyzed in terms of investment, costs, and profits (Rudnyckyj 2021).

In this thesis, I examine one particularly influential NGO within the IERM – which I call Teach-Them – and two ‘start-up’ NGOs founded by ‘alumni’ of the parent NGO Teach-Them. Each of these NGOs operate in a neoliberal imaginary inasmuch as they are both the subject

---

<sup>4</sup> . The interlocutor was Ramya Venkataraman, the co-founder of Centre for Teacher Accreditation. At the time Ball interviewed her, Venkataraman was Leader of McKinsey & Company's Education Practice in India

and object of quantitative assessment frameworks which ‘measure’ the quality of education interventions ‘in terms of investment, costs, and profits’. As my ethnography shows, the frenetic desire to grow and expand that characterises the IERM confirms its place in a global development discourse – one that extends beyond education – in which NGOs must always produce a narrative of success (see Mosse 2005).

One key feature of the neoliberalisation of education is the birth of the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) school. Most of this thesis centres on one education non-for-profit start-up in Delhi (which I call ‘Clear-Space’) that operates through PPPs with the Delhi government.

In the West, the earliest analyses of similar public-private partnerships consider them a feature of the neoliberalisation of education and warn that proliferation of the phenomenon is likely to exacerbate the marginalisation of the already marginalised (Ball 2016b; Apple 2006; Olssen, Codd, and O’Neill 2004). More recent studies, however, maintain a critique of neoliberalism while seeking to use the effects of this discourse to explore how teachers can use their creativity (Lenz Taguchi 2010), subjectivity (Ball 2016b), or both (Davies 2014), to develop pedagogies that slip through neoliberally-informed surveillance and provide meaningful learning to their students.

As for India, the effects of neoliberal culture appear far from homogenous (see Gooptu 2013), but PPP schools are tied up in the global neoliberalisation of education, and PPP schools are the physical location onto which the educationalists in my study project their dreams of social change. To provide context for how school PPPs arrived in contemporary Delhi, I now provide a brief history of primary school education in India and locate India’s more specific role in the global education discourse.

### **Primary school provision in India: a short history**

Although the 1947 Constitution of India noted universal primary education as essential to the development of the incipient nation, the complexities of building the bureaucracy needed to administer it left the provision of nationwide primary school incomplete (Sripati and Thiruvengadam 2004). Rather than rehearsing a history of education in India since 1947 independence, (see Vaidyanatha Ayyar 2017; Ghosh 2009), I begin my review at the economic



liberalisation of the 1990s, when foreign organisations, for-profit and NGOs alike, brought new money and new ideas to administer such an education system in India. As part of this legacy, and the neoliberal rationality that came with it, public-private partnerships (PPPs) emerged as a way for NGOs to access government-run schools and the children who study there. A large proportion of these NGOs are based in the nation's capital, and although efforts to educate rural children maintain attention, it is especially in cities, and most prominently Delhi, that the public and private sector are experimenting with operational collaborations in the provision of primary education.<sup>5</sup>

In 2009 the Indian government ratified the Right to Education Act (RTE) thereby legally formalising the state's responsibility to provide free primary education for every 6-14 year old in the country. Nine years earlier, in 2000, India committed to the UN Millennium Development Goals, number two of which was to achieve 'universal primary education' by 2015. These top-down directives are matched, although no means ubiquitously, by calls to receive their right to education sent directly from the country's lowest-income citizens (Alexander 2003; Kingdon and Muzammil 2003), whether these social groups have a clear idea of what education they need to prosper economically, or whether schools and universities will provide it (see Jeffrey et al 2008).

Until 2009, responsibility for primary schooling sat with individual state-governments, and not the national government, a governance position that led to widely disparate approaches to schooling, ranging from communist-led drives for total literacy in West Bengal and Kerala to almost total neglect in remote areas of the northern Hindi belt. In the 1990s, low-fee private schools began to appear in urban and rural areas to provide access to education for low-income families who had been historically underserved by the government (Tooley 2009; Härmä 2011). By the early 2000s these for-profit enterprises became so prolific as to be seen as a 'shadow institutional framework' in lieu of schooling the government itself had failed to provide (P. Srivastava 2008). Between 2014 and May 2016 the government forced over 7000 low-fee private schools to close for their failure to comply with 'norms laid down under the Right to Education Act' (NISA 2016). Simultaneous to this mass school closure – and in part

---

<sup>5</sup> In order to protect the identities of educators who I display with intimacy in my ethnography below, I have chosen to keep vague the specific origins PPPs that allowed NGOs to co-manage Delhi schools. It would not be enough to provide pseudonyms for these organisations, and I choose to tread carefully with the lives of my educator-friends at the cost of more precise sociological analysis.

as a response to the public cry for better quality state-provided schooling – sections of the government forged partnerships with other private enterprises, such as Teach-Them, which is now one of their most visible partners across India.

### **Teach-Them, Delhi, and Public-Private Partnership schools**

Teach-Them is an integral actor in the Indian Education Reform Movement. It is an education NGO that aims to inspire its affiliates with a vision for every child in India to receive an excellent education'.<sup>6</sup> Its main practice is to inspire young graduates to care about education reform by placing them as classroom teachers in non-elite urban schools. Teach-Them sees itself as a movement, and believes its real impact on the 'education for all' mission occurs in what its members do after they have completed a two-year teaching fellowship. Of the four central characters of my thesis, three are Teach-Them alumni – and the fourth is an NGO founder whose co-founder trained at Teach-Them.

The possibility for government-funded schools to be run by private organisations is especially present in Delhi because of a unique feature of the city's socio-historical landscape. Delhi has a long history of extreme wealth inequality (Heller et al 2015), and this history is reflected in the number of elite private schools, and the even greater number of less-elite private schools that have sprung up in their shadow (Tooley and Dixon 2007). The lack of investment in state-provided schooling since independence and the injection of wealth through economic liberalisation in the 1990s led the growing Indian middle class to evacuate government schools and invest large sections of their income in private schooling. Rising house prices in Delhi caused the lower-income members of certain south Delhi residential enclaves to move to cheaper homes. The combination of these two phenomena led to the depopulation of the sizable yet under-funded government schools located in these enclaves; schools designed to serve 500 children now serve 50 as all the local would-be students travel across the city to private schools. Supported by a partnership-facilitation organisation, a suite of India-founded NGOs has forged partnerships with the government and are repopulating such schools. The school in which I

---

<sup>6</sup> Excellence, for Teach-Them, is consciously left open and vague, but they generally subscribe to a correlation between the label of 'excellence' and ensuring the children pass government-set exams and ultimately acquire higher income occupations than their parents. To help anonymise Teach-Them, I do not provide references to their website and literature.

conducted much of my ethnographic research is a PPP Delhi primary school run by the local authority, but directly supported by the Teach-Them alumni-founded NGO Clear-Space.<sup>7</sup> The school became a physical space through which I could both take part in the daily workings of an NGO-government partnership and get to know the wider culture of the NGO.

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, social-emotional learning, and stable selves**

Teach-Them, Clear Space, and other NGOs that I cover in my thesis actively associate with two other distinct education discourses: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and social-emotional learning. I here provide a brief history and overview of these discourses because they are central to the image of the individual self that circulates within the IERM.

In the 1980s, American teachers and educationalists realised that the rise of neoliberal economics and the neoliberalisation of other non-economic service provision (health, education) would cause significant changes to the future job market (Mehta et al 2020). They believed that a neoliberal post-Fordist market would no longer need specialised workers trained for linear careers, but instead would require a workforce of self-fashioning individuals who could reshape their skills to meet the flexible and fast-changing demands of labour markets. In response to this analysis, they began developing new pedagogies and curricula that might better prepare children for this ‘21<sup>st</sup> century world’. There was no single origin for the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills movement, and a genealogy of a specific origin is not necessary for this thesis. What is important is that Teach-Them, Clear Space, and many other NGOs of the IERM have discovered these ‘21st century skills’ and made them central to the education interventions they design and implement in PPP schools. Between 2016-2019 – the period over which I completed Master’s and PhD fieldwork in India – the most commonly spoken of feature of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills were ‘the 4Cs’ – Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking and Creativity.

We will meet these four ‘skills’ again in our analysis of the NGOs in the ethnography below. Here, I note them to hint towards their origins as responses to neoliberal society. The 21st Century Skills movement in the USA attempted to provide a solution to changing labour demands by teaching kids *skills* instead of *knowledge*. One way it did this was by positing *dispositions* - like ‘curiosity’ or ‘empathy’ - as *skills* which could be taught. This is the point

---

<sup>7</sup> See La Dousa 2014 for a thorough breakdown of schools and school administration in north India.

where 21st Century Skills blend with another global education movement – social-emotional learning, or SEL.

Social-emotional learning is another broad movement within education discourse. Social-emotional learning can cover practices such as ‘mindfulness’ in UK schools, but has more recently been codified by organisations into curricula that can be deployed globally. For example, the SEE learning curriculum was officially launched in Delhi in April 2009. A year earlier, the Delhi government launched the Happiness Curriculum – another instance of the spread of social-emotional learning (SEL). I will come back to SEL in situ during my ethnography, but here I want to note its connection to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills and neoliberalisation.

This thesis explores how entrepreneurial educators of the IERM struggle to simultaneously maintain an ‘authentic’ sense of self and achieve professional success. One ‘skill’ which they themselves value, and indeed attempt to master, is the skill of ‘resilience’ – that is, the ability to retain their shape/essence while responding to the changeable demands of an unregulated, ‘neoliberal’ market. NGOs like Clear-Space depend on grant-making foundations and larger NGOs to fund their work. Funders act like investors who operate in other neoliberal markets: they scrutinise founders to assess whether or not they will produce reliable ‘returns on investment’. Founders, in turn, present themselves as flexible, innovative, and ‘sharp’ – as one of my interlocutors likes to describe himself. At the same time, educators in the Teach-Them community are taught to see themselves as individuals with a core self from which they draw their unshakable sense of commitment and purpose. In this way, entrepreneurial educators aim to display both unwavering commitment to the ‘mission’ of the Movement, and the ‘skills’ of flexibility and resilience that allow them to *adapt* the size and shape of their programs to meet what they see as a changeable education ‘market’. The *outputs*, then, of these education social enterprises are meant to be adaptable and relational to the market (to needs of parents, to funding streams) whereas the *persons* who work in them must be unquestionably stable and fixed.

Neoliberal subjectification imposes a double bind: educators must appear fixed and stable (appear as a ‘solid investment’) *and* flexibly responsive to market-like changeability in a neoliberal education sector. This double bind is the first subjective tension which entrepreneurial educators of the IERM suffer, and there are more to follow. My research highlights both how the IERM believe that 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and social-emotional learning are

necessary for training children to succeed in the current, neoliberal labour market, and how these discourses are already shaping the subjective reality of educators trying to administer this education.

One problem with a focus on social-emotional learning is that it draws attention away from how structural and cultural barriers – such as caste-discrimination and social capital – can affect a child's 'success'. And one reason why these structural inequalities can be ignored is because the IERM are almost exclusively middle-class graduates who have inherited a belief in meritocracy and the intrinsic power of the individual (see A. Subramanian 2019).

In the next two sections I take these issues in turn. I first explore the rise of the notion of 'neoliberal subjectivity' in India, and then examine why and how the Indian middle-class are rallying around the education of the individual self as a social and moral mission.

## Neoliberal subjectivity in India

### A neoliberal technology of self in colonial India?

In a recent work, anthropologist Sanjay Srivastava offers an empirical reading of the discourse of neoliberalism in India. His ethnography examines government sanctioned personality development courses aimed at producing 'entrepreneurial selves'. He concludes that 'neoliberal processes ... do not necessarily produce neoliberal subjects', but instead subjects inhabit 'relational flexibility – the strategic and concurrent participation in "pre-neoliberal" networks as well as market processes' (Srivastava, in press).

His point is that the targets of neoliberal policies do not *change* per se but learn to adapt and operate with a 'split self' – they display neoliberal practices at work but maintain traditional hierarchies at home. Srivastava's work continues a trend in the scholarship on neoliberalism in South Asia in which individuals are seen to use their own agency to pick and choose neoliberal ways of being as may serve them (Cross 2013; Gooptu 2013b). But it is Srivastava's use of the term 'relational' which makes it so relevant for the direction of my thesis, because it is by framing my ethnographic work through *relational ontology* that I make sense of the affective

experience of entrepreneurial educators as they negotiate their own attempts to live up to neoliberal ideals.

Before I articulate the importance of relationality to my theoretical framework, I first provide an overview of how the idea of a manageable, ‘improvable’ self has become central to the relationship between education development and the role of the middle-class in contemporary India. To do this, I begin by exploring one origin point of neoliberal subjectivity, which incidentally, is also provided by the scholarship of Sanjay Srivastava.

In *Constructing Post-Colonial India* (1998), Srivastava investigates the Doon School, one of India’s most elite education institutions and the paragon of the British public school in India. Inaugurated in 1935, the school aimed to provide elite Indians with a new cultural identity more fitting with the upcoming responsibility of running a nation state. Srivastava argues the pedagogy of the school was inspired by the discourse of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Indian nationalists, one in which ‘self-discipline’ became a key value. The anthropologist suggests that, ‘the disciplinary enterprise [of preparing for independence] is concerned with the individual and, *subsequently*, the society’. This enterprise ‘represented the triumph of the cult of the “personality”, where all transformations are simply a matter of transforming the (male) self’ (38). He continues, ‘the establishment of the School ... represented the elevation of the individual – the body – as both a “method” for understanding social predicament and a tool for the amelioration of the “misfortunes” besetting a colonised society’ (60). What Srivastava is describing is a technology of self: the boys in the school were directed to see an ethical purpose in self-reflection and self-awareness. These boys were to use their body as a ‘tool’ to ameliorate ‘misfortunes’; in other words, they were to practise self-discipline to effect social change.

Srivastava conducted his ethnography of the Doon School in the 1990s and argued that the ‘urban post-colonial Indian identity’ was largely produced by the British institution of the ‘public’ school. Like all public schools, the Doon School was designed to train elites, and continues to do so. From 19<sup>th</sup> century colonised India, through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Doon School was founded, up until Srivastava’s study of 1990s, the subject expected to undergo a technology of self was the male elite. And, as Srivastava details (56), the idealised elite male subject was expected to operate with three interlocking ways of being: he must be rational and non-religious; he must favour positivist science as method of intellectual inquiry; and he must value equality.

The pedagogy and culture of the Doon School was heavily influenced by the Protestant British schoolmasters who helped found the institution.<sup>8</sup> And Protestantism, as Daromir Rudnyckyj argues in a development of Weber's famous claim, is intractably linked to neoliberalism: 'A key affinity between Protestantism and neoliberalism is the fact that both are premised on the systematic and reflexive application of reason to action' (Rudnyckyj 2021, n/a<sup>9</sup>). For Rudnyckyj, the Protestant, 'must engage in a kind of constant, unrelenting, and reflexive introspection, asking him or herself whether their actions accord with the will of God.'. Same goes for those subjectified within neoliberalism, as anthropologist Carla Freeman notes in relation to her study of the Caribbean middle class, 'the self as an entrepreneurial "project" under constant renovation is a key signpost of neoliberalism' (2014:1). Both the Protestant and the neoliberal, it seems, live 'a life subjected to systematic rationalization' (Rudnyckyj 2021).

What I am keen to track is how the technology of self of Srivastava's Doon School has reappeared in the IERM as a pedagogical solution to India's structural inequality. But to understand the theory of subjectivity carried by the IERM, we must quickly cover the recent ascension of the 'autonomous' psychological self in the West.

### **The 'autonomous' psychological self and neoliberalism**

In, *Inventing Our Selves*, Nikolas Rose (1998) examines how the rise of psychology and psychological theory of selfhood in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has come to dominate normative conceptions of personhood and subjectivity. The 'contemporary condition of self' is characterised by our desire for 'self-realization, self-esteem, and self-fulfilment in everyday life' (Rose 1998:4). His argument is that psychology is to blame for our current conception of a self as, 'coherent, bounded, individualized, intentional, the locus of thought, action, and belief the origin of its own actions, the beneficiary of a unique biography' (ibid).

Human beings must interpret their past, and dream their future, as outcomes of personal choices ... choices are, in their turn, seen as realization of the attributes of the choosing

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf Varma (2007:2) on how Victorian generation of British colonisers were heavily influenced by Mill's utilitarianism

<sup>9</sup> All quotes are from Rudnyckyj are lifted from his original lecture and therefore I do not include references for page numbers

self – expressions of personality – and reflect back upon the individual who has made them. (18)

In Rose's conception of self, a conception of self I would call 'neoliberal', each person must accept they have a 'personality' which directs their choices. And it is their choices which determine the course of their lives and the course of history.

Srivastava's reading of the Doon School also highlights how the narrative of choice is important to the development of the self. The Doon students are expected 'to use their body as a "tool" to ameliorate "misfortunes" of society'; they are expected to practise self-discipline so as to train the mind to make the right *choices*. At the same time, according to Rose, 'psychologists elaborate complex emotional, interpersonal, and organizational techniques by which the practices of everyday life can be organized according to the ethic of autonomous selfhood' (17). Autonomous selfhood, here, is an *ethic* – it is something 'good'.

The important point here is this: the Doon School is at least one very influential institution in India in which the self is seen as the locus of social change: a student learns self-discipline and turns their body into a 'tool' that serves the nation. By using self-discipline to become 'autonomous', the student provides an ethical contribution to society. But this practice of self-discipline is not self-sacrificial. Instead, according to Rose, the burgeoning of psychology has allowed us to believe that we can gain knowledge of ourselves as autonomous individuals and use that knowledge to reach self-realisation (17). Psychology has offered us a theory that allows us to see ourselves as autonomous individuals and presumes to offer us the tools to live as autonomous individuals. As Rose states, 'to live as an autonomous individual, you must learn new techniques for understanding and practising upon yourself' (18).

What, then, are these techniques we must learn so as to live as an autonomous individual and achieve self-realisation? As I will show, it is Rose's concern with psychology which seems so relevant to the educators of Delhi with whom I did my fieldwork. I will return to this point below as I sketch out the technology of self that I believe circulates in the IERM. For now, I want to continue the framing of my research by exploring how the image of an autonomous self as described by Srivastava, Rudnykyj, and Rose, has blossomed in contemporary India.



## The normative ‘enterprising citizen’ of post-liberalisation India

The economic liberalisation of India in the 1990s is the key cultural event which allows Rose’s conception of a normative ‘autonomous self’ to find a home in contemporary India. As David Sancho notes in his 2015 ethnography of middle-class families in Kerala, the ‘image of contemporary youth as self-reliant, self-motivated and highly ambitious’ is now the ‘normative subjectivity’ into which parents attempt to usher their children (2015:74). In the introduction to her edited volume, *Enterprise Culture in Neoliberal India* (2013), Nandini Gooptu recognises a key element of this new normative subjectivity: the self as ‘active enterprising citizen’ – one who is ‘self-regulated, self-governed and self-disciplined’ (Gooptu 2013b:4). Drawing on Foucauldian scholarship, Gooptu also recognises that a key practice of this new ‘enterprising citizen’ is the practice of seeing oneself as an enterprise to invest in:

The idea of one’s life as the enterprise of oneself implies that there is a sense in which one remains always employed in (at least) that enterprise ... This is ‘the care of the self’ . . . [relying] heavily on the contributions of the ‘new psychological culture’, that cornucopia of the techniques of the self which symbiotize aptitude with self-awareness and performance with self-realization (not to mention self-presentation). (Gordon quoted in Gooptu 2013b:4).<sup>10</sup>

Enterprise culture, Gooptu argues, does indeed induce contemporary Indian subjects to apply more focus to what Srivastava described as ‘the cult of personality’, but this shift to self could not occur without presenting attention to self as a moral act:

... in the face of alternative historical constructions of self-hood and against the inheritance of the past, which privileged other values, including a ‘social’ rather than an individual. It is necessary ... to valorize and moralize the individual pursuit of the self, re-designating it in terms of a moral and virtuous quest for individual responsibility, self-actualization, and self-determination. (Gooptu 2013b:7)

The idea that one’s own personhood, one’s self, could be mobilised as public good was a key part of the training for the elite of the Doon School. These sons of the wealthy upper castes and

---

<sup>10</sup> Gordon’s description of a ‘technique of the self’ in which one’s aptitude is measured in one’s self-awareness could not be more apt for the technology of self circulating in the IERM. The idea that self-realisation is best manifested via ‘performance’ – by doing, or being seen to be doing – is also central to the logic of social entrepreneurs of education who I showcase. I return to this valuing of skills in the ethnography, where we see ‘social-emotional learning’ and ‘21st Century Skills’ as the pedagogical practices which equate aptitude with self-awareness, and self-realisation as always performative.

classes were the nascent heirs to a newly independent India that needed a ruling class fit to manage the British-made institutions the democracy would inherit. Now, in economically liberalised India, new ways of managing the populace are being imagined. If part of the Doon boys' moral framework was couched in state socialism, where the elite decide how to bring about social equality, then the growing middle-class build their moral framework from the individualist logic of neoliberalism: each individual must be given the training to self-manage, because to self-manage is to look after oneself, and looking after oneself is – in a very Thatcherite way – a service to the community.

My research tracks a small section of the contemporary Indian middle-class who are continuing the tradition of self-discipline practised in the Doon School. But now, the aim of this middle-class elite is not only to turn their bodies into 'tools' for social amelioration, but to design education programs that allow *all* children in India to learn individuated self-development, to ensure 'the cult of personality' grows to include each Indian citizen.

In the next section, I explore the relationship between the growing Indian middle-class, their sense of national moral duty, and the notion of 'education' per se. I set the stage for my ethnographic exploration of how the IERM is populated by the young Indian middle class who have come to value purposed-leadership and social entrepreneurship in response to their subjectification.

## **Middle-class India: morality, education, and social entrepreneurship**

### **Self-making and meritocracy in the Indian middle class**

There is no concrete definition of who constitutes 'the middle-class' in India, and instead of attempting my own definition here or relying on a suite of others, I prefer to explore who the middle-class *are* by exploring what it is they *do* in relation to my main themes of education and subjectivity.

The power of the early, colonial-era middle-class in India developed not from their economic power, but from their ability to become ‘cultural entrepreneurs’ (Joshi 2001:2). Especially through the creation of the professional and cultural roles of teacher, journalist, novelist and politician, savvy individuals began to ‘self-fashion’ – they created a role for themselves in society which distinguished them as a separate class between the indigenous aristocracy and manual labourers. To further distinguish themselves from the landed elite, they ‘deployed ideas of equality and meritocracy derived ultimately from the tradition of the Enlightenment’ (Joshi 2001:18).<sup>11</sup> By the 1930s, similar Enlightenment ideals structured the moral and political education of India’s ultra-elite in the Doon School (Srivastava 1998).

In fact, it is perhaps a devotion to meritocracy that best defines the seemingly heterogeneous communities who identify as middle-class in contemporary India. As Sancho notes, leaning on work by Carol Upadhyaya (2011), ‘the pervasiveness of the ideology of merit amongst self-defined middle classes conjures a unifying ‘middle class’ identity’ (Sancho 2015:15). Continuing the debate, Ajantha Subramanian (2019) reminds us that social hierarchy was embedded within the Enlightenment discourse of meritocracy. The logic of meritocracy was that ‘natural’ talents would be rewarded with well-paid, high-status socio-professional positions, instead of relying on the feudal logic of hereditary titles. Subramanian argues that the discourse of meritocracy has allowed the middle-class to justify their growing wealth and power. In her primary example, the Brahmins who populate prestigious IITs claim their success has nothing to do with caste and all to do with determination, intelligence, and ‘merit’.

The first generation of boys at the Doon School became the middle-class administrators of newly independent India. They had attended a school overcoded with the values of the Enlightenment (equality, rationality, secularism, merit) and were the paragon of the ‘modern’ subject in India. In contemporary India, IITians are the Doon boys’ analogue, they see themselves as ‘modern subjects ... with sincere commitments to universalistic ideals of equality, democracy, and rationality’ (A. Subramanian 2019:19). They believe that only those who ‘have achieved this enlightened consciousness [are] suited to lead’ (ibid). In this cultural logic, only those given the permission and the tools (the technologies of self) to learn how to

---

<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that it is not only the elite who may oppose egalitarianism and equality, whether in historical or contemporary India. As Pilivasky (2020) convincingly argues, the Rajasthani Kanjar caste lament the loss of kingship and feudal power in their region, because although they were ‘lower’ in the social hierarchy, they were part of a system of patronage that kept them somewhat protected.

self-fashion can develop the rationality and ‘mindset’ that is necessary to be a leader in modern India.

To have the capacity to self-fashion is one key marker of becoming part of the ‘modern’ middle class, and part of the psychological trick of learning to self-fashion is to learn to dismiss the influence of structures of social stratification. In the case of Subramanian’s work, it is caste that is dismissed as a factor that influences an individual’s success. In the case of the IERM – which operates as part of a development discourse of antipolitics (Ferguson 1990) – it is caste, class, gender, geographical location, or any other social structure of subjectification, which must be seen as irrelevant to a child’s potential for prosperity.

Self-fashioning is important to the IERM in two directions: (i) it is essential that members of the IERM practise an ‘enlightened consciousness’ so they can present themselves as ‘individual citizens defined by merit’ who are ‘suited to lead’. (A. Subramanian 2019:18-19); and (ii) because the IERM are attempting to provide the tools for self-fashioning to the children of lower-income communities so that these children can become tomorrow’s enlightened leaders while turning a blind eye to the socio-economic structures and identities that are bound to hold them back. The ethico-political problem that I identify with this educational mission is similar to Subramanian’s: that it is cruel to teach the marginalised to believe in meritocracy when cultural norms such as caste continue to influence which persons actually succeed and prosper in contemporary India. I return to this question in the final ethnographic chapter of this thesis – first a bit more on the middle-class.

### **Education and the Indian middle-class**

In a meritocratic theory of social change, any individual can learn to self-fashion, embrace the Doon School values of secularism, positivism, and equality, and make themselves a legitimate leader of modern India. However, since Independence, it has been essential to the protective logic of the middle-class to circumscribe access to the education needed for one to learn to ‘self-fashion’.

The 1947 Constitution of India details that, ‘the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years’ (GOI 2006:11) – but it was not

until 2009 that the Right to Education Act legally bound the state to enact this element of the constitution. Instead of investing in the proliferation of primary schooling, the new state of India invested heavily in higher education institutions – especially technical universities such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs).<sup>12</sup> Pawan Varma provides a class analysis of the focus on higher education over universal primary school noting that ‘the lopsided development of education in India’, (i.e. lots of universities, not enough primary schools), ‘is directly linked to the structure of Indian society’ (2007). By denying marginalised communities access to primary education, the middle class restricted competition for places at higher education institutions, and ensured their own children easier access (Bardhan 2010; Weiner 1991).

More recently, anthropologists of India argue that this practice of patrolling access to quality education remains the anxiety of the middle class. Fernandes and Heller (2006) apply Bourdieuan theory to argue – in line with Joshi’s (2001) historical interpretation – that because middle-class power ‘does not derive primarily from property but rather from education and cultural capital, it is particularly dependent on the need to protect status privileges’ (2006:504). As Sancho notes, it is ‘the rise of the idea of the middle class as an aspirational model’ that intensifies the established middle-class’ anxiety around what counts as a valuable education, and who should have access to it (2015:8).

Debates on access to a *valuable* education are important considering empirical studies that show how attempts to democratise education have led to disappointment when access to higher education does not lead to lucrative employment. The university-educated participants in the Jeffries’ (Jeffery et al 2008) study of rural Uttar Pradesh fail to find work not only because of job scarcity, but because access to middle-class jobs require social and cultural capital not formally taught in institutions. Continuing this Bourdieuan lens, Sancho (2015) points out how it is often acts of habitus (the way one speaks English, body posture) that determine professional and social success of youth in Kerala, rather than ‘knowledge’ gained from school (98-115). This point is crystallised in Lilly Irani’s (2019) ethnographic exploration of a Delhi design agency where staff were hired not on their ability to efficiently complete tasks, but on the way they presented themselves as curious, ambitious, and imaginative (78-102).

---

<sup>12</sup> See A. Subramanian (2019:58-81) for a detailed history of the IITs.

The middle classes have always ‘mobilize[d] all their social and cultural capital to secure access to the best school’ (Fernandes and Heller 2006:515) – but whether they value the academic knowledge or social and cultural capital gained from attending elite schools remains a moot point. What is certain is that now at least one small faction of the middle class is recognising what Sanjay Joshi has argued: that becoming middle class rests on the ability to self-fashion. The question of whether school can indeed *teach* this ability – as the Doon School professed to do – is being tested at present in the start-up NGOs which populate my ethnography. IERM educators believe that school has the power to teach self-fashioning; and they believe this because access to formal education has been so central to the conceptualisation of their own sense of modernity (Donner and De Neve 2011; Liechty 2003).

It is no surprise then that ‘education’ becomes the method through which socially conscious members of the middle class can most easily imagine the realisation of Indian ‘development’, and no surprise that *schools* are the site through which this education is delivered. But the reason why the middle-class have become so focused on education development *now*, in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, requires a different historical reading.

### **Social entrepreneurship: a new moral mission for liberalisation’s children**

Members of the IERM stand at a unique intersection in the cultural history of India: they are the inheritors of a self-fashioning, meritocracy-devoted middle-class *and* subjects of the global neoliberalisation of development and markets. Caught in this assemblage of subjectifying discourses, I argue that an elite layer of the socially-minded middle class are now drawn to a specific socio-professional role, the role of *social entrepreneur of education*.

In post-liberalisation India a flurry of scholarship suggested that both the ‘established’ and the ‘new’ middle classes had become emptied of ideology and political direction (Varma 2007; Fernandes and Heller 2006; Baviskar and Ray 2011). The new indifference of the middle class to the plights of the poor was juxtaposed to the previous generation of middle class who grew up with a ‘developmentalist’ discourse led by Gandhi and Nehru (Varma 2007). As David Sancho confirms, ‘if a job in the Indian Administrative and Foreign Services was seen as a pre-eminent position in the middle-class imaginary under the developmental regime, today the middle classes locate their aspirations in the private sector’ (2015:5).

Not only do the middle-class favour private employment over public, but as Sancho continues, ‘contemporary established middle classes in present-day India mistrust the state.’ (15). This assertion is important to my argument. The narrative of Teach-Them is that government schools are failing and that young graduates-cum-teachers can save the students therein. The state is tired, corrupt, and bureaucratic. The individual is energised, noble and dynamic. It is easy for Teach-Them to draw this opposition because most fellows who join the program are from middle-class families, who, like Sancho notes, ‘mistrust the state’. Moreover, as Srivastava (in press) and LaDousa (2014) argue, middle-class mistrust of the state has influenced working-class assumptions of state-provided education, and the working class are following the middle class in seeking private schooling. Teach-Them and other IERM NGOs make use of this working-class mistrust of the state to gain favour with low-income families who are at points reassured to know that the government school to which they send their child has a PPP affiliation with an NGO.

The state, then, is no longer a site through which the most aspirational middle class can contribute to the moral mission of India’s development. At the same time, the growing middle-class acceptance of the ‘entrepreneur’ as force for social good has been well documented, and this is even more the case when applied to the field of education (Gooptu 2013b).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Rudnyckyj (2021) reminds us of the links between neoliberalism and Protestantism – and how, for Weber, Protestants valued ‘the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume’ (Weber 2005:40). As anthropologist Andrea Muehlebach (2012) has shown, Christian morality and neoliberalism work together in contemporary Italy to provide the middle class with a framework for ethical practice. In India, the latent power of Nehru’s development dream is perhaps the analogue for a Christian morality. Whatever it means to do ‘good’ in contemporary India, it’s always shaped by neoliberalism.

The IERM is so attractive to liberalisation’s (grand)children (see Lukose 2009) precisely because they crave the political direction and ethical purpose that their parents seem to lack. The IERM pick up the dormant Nehruvian development discourse and – partnered with a focus on selfhood and entrepreneurialism circulating in neoliberal ideology – inspire a group of

---

<sup>13</sup> See especially Gooptu’s (2013b:1-2) comments on Times of India’s Lead India campaign of 2007.

young middle-class Indians to care about development. At the same time, as education NGO fellowship programs gain legitimacy amongst middle-class families, it becomes increasingly acceptable for aspiring sections of the middle class to take part in these development projects. Not all fellows who join Teach-Them – a key NGO of the IERM – arrive as members of an upper middle-class, but all of them leave with the cultural capital of having worked with a ‘global’ NGO, and the *social* capital (i.e. social connections) to help them secure more lucrative jobs.

Renewed with a mission to do something for ‘society’, the middle class turn to education because they have always seen education as their ticket to success. And in a post-liberalisation world of capitalist realism, where the middle-class distrust the state, young graduates seek ‘private’ methods to do public good: they start NGOs that operate like Silicon Valley-inspired start-ups. They become *social entrepreneurs*.

### **The social entrepreneur of education**

The idea that self-change is the route to social change entangles with the neoliberal imaginary of the IERM in which quantifiable, scalable development initiatives are highly valued. Starting an organisation that teaches children that *their* personal self-development is the key to social change allows founders to picture themselves as the cause of exponential social change. Education promises the greatest social impact because educators fantasise that not only does their social initiative improve the lives of beneficiaries in the present, but that by inducing children into the education reform movement they are producing a whole new generation of ‘change-makers’ who themselves will launch projects with their own social impact (see Drayton 2006).

How better to become an *ethical* entrepreneurial citizen than to become an education social entrepreneur who helps all children in India to practise the self-fashioning technology of self of the contemporary middle class? In meritocratic logic, marginalised children only need the *opportunity* to self-actualise, and they will become their own saviours. The IERM produces social entrepreneurs of education who believe that their own success has been a result not of social hierarchy but of their own grit, determination, and self-motivation. They also believe that all young people can become masters of their own destiny if they are given the right tools.



Providing every child in India with the guidance and support to begin practising a technology of self that allows them to reach self-actualisation becomes the most revolutionary education shift imaginable.

As I show in the ethnography below, NGOs like Teach-Them wield a powerful influence over inducing young graduates to both join the IERM and locate the role of social entrepreneur as the most valued method of contributing to the Movement. To help analyse the processes of Teach-Them subjectification, I introduce the term *purposed-leadership*. It is purposed-leadership that Teach-Them members come to value and desire as a method for self-actualisation.

The term ‘purposed-leadership’ helps me analyse both how social entrepreneurship becomes such a desirable role and how members of Teach-Them socially and professionally behave. However, I reserve a further definition of purposed-leadership until the end of my first ethnographic chapter, because as anthropologist Bhri Gupta Singh notes, a concept is just a word until the ethnographer can show how it is ‘brought to life’ in their descriptions of the field (Singh 2015:4). Purposed-leadership is too central a concept for me to explicate without the support of ethnography.

A final point on social entrepreneurship: it is not that every educator in the IERM is only valued when they run their own start-up NGO, but that social entrepreneurship is the archetype to which Teach-Them educators aspire. My thesis shows how educators with different life histories respond differently to the archetype, how they craft a narrative of self betwixt and between regimes of neoliberal subjectification, the neo-development discourse of the IERM, and the desire to self-actualise through self-reflection and self-management. In this negotiation, another ‘value’ haunts their path, a value which transcends neoliberal individuation and – in my reading – reminds educationalists of the multiplicity of their identifications and connections. This is the value of *family*.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf Trnka and Trundle (2014) for a review of how anthropologists have sought to detotalise neoliberal self-management and ‘responsibilisation’ in response to ethnographic evidence that people continue to ‘care’ relationally.

## Family – a concept and a practice

Up till now I have framed the IERM and its NGOs as organisations who promote social entrepreneurship and purposed-leadership, and who provide a narrative in which self-change becomes social change. One might assume, as I did, that the intensity of this individualist discourse would leave little room for a focus on ‘family’ – an almost necessarily non-egalitarian cultural practice. Nevertheless, one of the key discoveries of my ethnographic work is that ‘family’ preoccupies the educators of the IERM in multiple and complex ways.

The editors of a recent special issue of SAMAJ – Changing Family Realities in South Asia? – state that their collection of papers, ‘explain that the family and the idea of the family exist in multiple forms in contemporary South Asia’ (Bhandari and Titzmann 2017). This distinction between ‘family’ and the ‘idea of family’ provides a helpful analytic framework for how the theme of ‘family’ operates in my ethnography.

Patricia Uberoi’s work on family also helps frame why it might be that ‘family’ – as both a socio-cultural event *and* an ideal – seems to stalk my exploration of neoliberal subjectivity and entrepreneurial selfhood (Uberoi 2006; 2002). As explained above, the ideal social entrepreneur of education must align with the ‘Enlightenment’ values of secularism, positivist science, and egalitarianism which also haunt the neoliberal imaginary. And, as Uberoi notes, ‘unlike caste, class, and religion, the family manifests as an especially unifying institution throughout Indian society’, despite the clear ‘regional differences in styles of kinship’ (2001:339). For the contemporary ‘modern’ upper middle-classes, it is untenable to explicitly defend caste (even if they depend on it, cf. A. Subramanian 2019) and/or class as legitimate social values, as both deny egalitarianism. Equally, their commitment to ‘modern’ secularism means the ‘enlightened’ citizen cannot reasonably defend religion.<sup>15</sup> Family, then, is one central South Asian social institution which can remain unthreatening to a devotion to secular egalitarianism.

Upon embarking on fieldwork, I did not intend to explore the theme of family, but the word, concept, and practice of *making family* reappeared with such regularity in the field that I could

---

<sup>15</sup> Even if in practice many of the supposedly ‘enlightened’ middle-class still support Hindu nationalism via political affiliation with the ruling BJP

not ignore it. As I will explore in my opening ethnographic chapter on the Teach-Them training Centre, one method by which the discourse of purposed-leadership in education proliferates is the way the residential Centre enacts family making practices. While new recruits are asked to separate themselves from other desires – money, family duty, pleasure – they are given in return a new network of support and understanding intended to replace – temporarily at least – the families they have stepped away from. Crucial to the design of this new family is the opportunity for individuation; each new educationalist discovers a ‘true’ ‘inner’ self. This self is seen and understood by the Movement in a way often not appreciated by one’s biological family. The ‘true’ self unlocked by Teach-Them needs a new family in which to be seen and held and Teach-Them present their own organisation as this family. And yet, as my ethnography reveals, the desire for validation and support from one’s biological family is never fully eradicated by the promise of new ‘chosen’ networks of kinship support.

In his insightful work on neoliberal subjecthood in India’s Special Economic Zones, Jamie Cross recognises that the self-improvement projects of his interlocutor Madhu were ‘shaped by his affective relationships with family members ... and his filial ties of love and respect as much as they were influenced by globally circulating discourses or languages of “entrepreneurship”’ (Cross 2013:127). Family, then, does not disappear in neoliberal India. In fact, the IERM actively attempt to reproduce a sense of family in their NGOs which validates young educationalists’ longing for a connected, related, embedded role that may have been (temporarily) lost by stepping away from family duties and joining the development sector.

I argue that desire for ‘family’ – a concept very familiar to these educators – increases just as educators are trained to focus on their own selves as sites of knowledge and resolve. In the pressure of learning to value this individuation, educators seem to experience an intense yearning for connection, community, and relatedness. And yet the IERM’s value of ‘purposed-leadership’ – and the production of an individuated ‘autonomous’ self from which purposed-leadership can be practised – seems to deny educators a narrative in which relatedness is central to their self-actualisation.

Educators are caught in another subjective tension. They at once imagine themselves as ‘autonomous’ selves who, by practising self-discipline and self-reflection, have the power to direct their own destiny. At the same time, educators value ‘family’ in a way that recognises their own discomfort with the narrative of ‘autonomy’. Educators *feel* stretched across different

regimes of value and conceptions of subjecthood, and to make sense of this experience of subjective tension, I read my ethnographic data through a theoretical framework which centralises the ontological reality of *relations*.

## Relational Ontology and Affect Theory

*... approaches to affect would feel a great deal less like a free fall if our most familiar modes of inquiry had begun with movement rather than stasis ...*

Gregg and Seigworth 2010:4

### Why relational ontology?

This thesis is about how middle-class Indian graduates become committed to the mission of social equality through education provision, and how they feel in desiring the purposed-leadership which is the central value of this world. I argue that social entrepreneurship becomes a key socio-professional practice through which middle-class educationalists can enact purposed-leadership. Furthermore, my data reveals the tension and emotional struggle of inhabiting the role of social entrepreneur, a role which demands the subject to present themselves as a consistent, regulated person who is worthy of financial investment and professional respect.

To make sense of the tension felt by entrepreneurial educationalists, I have chosen to follow specific metaphysical philosophers in their articulation of a reality posited on a relational ontology. By invoking a relational understanding of ontology, we are provided with a theoretical base in which the tension of the social entrepreneur makes sense. It is because the social entrepreneur attempts to maintain a consistent self and identity in different social and professional locations that they *feel* frustration and tension. As we see in the ethnography, it is moments where this *affective tension* becomes acute in which individuals narrativize themselves into naïve dichotomies that leave them feeling even more despondent and unfulfilled.

The relational ontology I posit here was developed by anti-capitalist, anti-humanist, and feminist thinkers to deconstruct positivist assumptions. It is these assumptions that structure the humanist liberalism which has become hegemonic in contemporary global business and development discourse. By understanding humans as ‘intra-active becomings’ (Barad 2007), we can make sense of the lived reality of social entrepreneurs in the contemporary Indian Education Reform Movement.

### **What is relational ontology?**

I use the term ‘relational ontology’ to refer to theories of existence which place relations and movement prior to entities and stasis. Deleuze and Guattari’s *A thousand plateaus* (1988) is one of the most influential texts in the proliferation of both relational ontology and affect theory. In his earlier work, Deleuze (1994 [1968]) suggested that our analysis of the world has been muddled by our belief that entities are logically prior to the relations that exist between them. He argues that objects only gain forms and attributes *after* a difference/relation has been recognised between them.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari develop the image of the rhizome to conceptualise how the relations that exist between things tell us more about the world than a study of the ‘things’ in and of themselves. Ultimately, they argue that we must think of objects not as bounded entities but ‘multiplicities’. Each object is always-already an ‘assemblage’: something which has been produced through the relations it has to other relations. To put it another way, any ‘object’ is a bundle of relations, differences and connections that interact in a consistent enough way for us to imagine them as unified objects.

It is this theory of the disunity of objects, this relational ontology (as opposed to entity ontology), that I read alongside the poststructuralist theory of the subject/self. One of the central motifs of poststructuralist philosophies is the idea that humans do not have fixed identities. Instead, each one of us is a ‘nexus of subjectivities’ (Walkerline 1990:25), we are each an accumulation of identifications and experiences that direct our actions with enough consistency to make it appear that we inhabit a unified self. For Judith Butler (1993), our apparent regularity congeals itself into materiality as we habitually cite hegemonic discourses.

By repeating to ourselves and others the labels and images we are told to be, we begin to make those images into material bodies that then become part of a normative mass that continues to dictate social truth. Butler insists that, as much as we might like to, we cannot fully desist from ‘citing the law’ (to use the Derridean language she uses), but only ‘subvert’ the iterations so as to destabilise normativity.

The feminist-physicist Karen Barad blends relational ontology and poststructuralist theories of subjectivity into a new theory of objects, relations, agency and performativity which she calls ‘agential realism’ (2007).<sup>16</sup> For Barad, every ‘object’ is so entangled in the existence of other ‘objects’ that it is not helpful to draw boundaries between an object and a relation, or between a self and other. Instead, ‘objects’ are continually ‘intra-acting’ with themselves and ‘others’, that is, they are continually making other objects just as they themselves are being made by those objects. They are not ‘interacting’, as that would suggest that each object has a definite boundary or limit, but ‘intra-acting’, because the relations that flow ‘inside’ the object are no different to the relations that flow ‘between’ one object and another.

The normative Western conception of a human as an individual, bounded unit has long been scrutinised by anthropologists of South Asia. Marriot describes a ‘dividual’ self as constructed through the absorption of ‘heterogeneous material substances’ (Marriott 1976:111). Daniel explores the ‘cultural reality of the nonindividual person’ through which ‘the very distinction between self and other is transcended’ (Daniel 1984:8). The central conceptual shift is to move from an understanding of objects (soil, food, humans, ideas) as circumscribed, bounded entities, to a recognition that the ‘properties of substances’ involve ‘their ability to mix and separate, to transform and be transformed, [and] to establish intersubstantial relationships ...’ (Daniel 1984: 3). What Marriot and Daniel are positing is clearly a relational ontology. Their ethnographic work foreshadows Barad’s ‘intra-active becoming’; both provide a theory of co-dependent co-making where the boundaries of individual ‘selves’ become productively blurred.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Barad’s understanding of the agency of objects shares similarities with Bruno Latour’s (1996) Actor-Network Theory, but I focus on Barad because she is in more direct conversation with feminist philosophers Judith Butler and Donna Haraway whose ethical ideas are also essential to my research design.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Marilyn Strathern’s (1990) work on ‘partible’ selves for how the concept of the ‘dividual’ transcends merely South Asian anthropology

The conceptualisation of selves as ‘intra-active becomings’ (Barad 2007) posits that the materiality of our bodies is constantly reconstituted and never stable. This means that the self can change moment to moment depending on the material-discursive atmosphere in which a subject is located. But, relying on a narrative of ‘autonomous’ selves ramified by the neoliberal imaginary of contemporary India, my interlocutor educators often attempt to locate a coherent self that persists across different environments. Marinated in a ‘psychologised’ culture, as posited by Nikolas Rose (1998) – and promoted by Teach-Them – these educators conflate their emotional lifeworlds with a ‘true’ self that holds the answer to their life purpose.

By taking relational ontology seriously, we see how any attempt to locate a ‘true’ self must recognise that this self is always-already relational. But for these educators, the self is earmarked as a stable site from which a definite purpose can be generated, a site which can remain consistent no matter the ‘external’ situation. What my ethnographic data shows, however, is that attempts by educators to maintain a consistent identity (set of values, ways of being) across differing social moments and events causes emotional intensity and intellectual confusion. By theorising existence as relational, we can begin to see why attempts at coherency cause educators affective strain. I suggest that a refreshed ontological perspective helps us understand the emotional and subjective experience of the pressure of playing the role of social entrepreneur of education, a role in which one must perform ‘autonomy’ and consistency to succeed.

What, then, does the *tension* and *struggle* of these educationalists look like empirically? I suggest that the struggle is most visible in moments of *affective intensity*. To introduce the term *affective intensity*, I first offer a brief description of *affect theory* and its genealogical connection to relational ontology.

### **Affect theory**

*... emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place ... it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made.*

Sara Ahmed (2015:10)

In the introduction to her germinal work, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed (2015) asks not what emotions *are*, but instead: what emotions *do*? Her focus on action immediately reveals her relationship to Butler's feminist performativity and Barad's new materialism as outlined above. In a way, Ahmed is also asking 'what are emotions?', because she – like Butler – understands existence in the fluid language of 'becoming' instead of the static language of 'being'. What we do *is* what we are. And although, as both Ahmed and Butler make clear, what we mostly do is repeat the normative scripts of patriarchy, racism, capitalism et al, we *do* have the chance to 'subvert' our citation of these discourses. Exploring what emotions do is perhaps an act of subversion itself.

Emotions and affect are not the same, but neither I nor my education interlocutors in Delhi used the term 'affect' to discuss the intensity of our feelings and experiences, so 'emotions' seem like a good place to start. However, the use of theory for deeper understanding often demands us to push beyond the familiar, and it is precisely what affect theory *does* (read: what affect theory *is*), that makes it so slippery to define.

Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon ...[it] accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between "bodies" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010:1)

Relatedness, force-encounters, the ebbs and swells of intensities. Just as Deleuze placed emphasis on the examination of relations between entities, rather than a study of the entities themselves, affect theorists are always focused on the 'in-between'.

Affect theory recognises the multiplicity of existence, and the 'contradiction' that appears when one attempts to read selves as coherent, bounded objects. To explore the quality of the tension of the social entrepreneur valuing purposed-leadership, I searched for *affectively intense* spaces where educators might display the emotional intensity of their lifeworld.<sup>18</sup> Let us follow Sara Ahmed in her exploration of the 'in-between-ness' of affect to show that it is exactly the *tension* inherent to conceptions of affect that gives the theory its life:

---

<sup>18</sup> As I explain in the methodology section, I also sought to *produce* some of these affectively intense spaces of my very own.



I have experienced numerous social occasions where I assumed other people were feeling what I was feeling, and that the feeling was, as it were, ‘in the room’, only to find out that others had felt quite differently. I would describe such spaces as ‘intense’. Shared feelings are at stake, and seem to surround us, like a thickness in the air, or an atmosphere. But these feelings not only *heighten tension*, they are also *in tension*. (Ahmed 2015: 10)

As an ethnographer, I wanted to get as close as possible to the emotional experience of my participants, I wanted to be with them as they were caught in the *tension* between feeling something and not finding the means to successfully communicate this feeling. As Ahmed writes, ‘emotions in their very intensity involve miscommunication’ (ibid).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it is precisely the miscommunication of emotion – the mystery of affect and how it builds – that I try to explore ethnographically.<sup>20</sup>

I name the affect which springs up in this miscommunication *affective intensity*, a term I have borrowed from 1980s psychologists who use it to describe how individuals experience different magnitudes of emotional response when faced with empirically equal stimuli (Larsen and Diener 1987). For me, the term is useful to describe what I saw as moments when educationalists in Delhi became overwhelmed by emotion, emotion which seems to be produced in the friction of their attempts to commensurate their ethico-political beliefs and professional choices. That is, both retain their dedication to authentic self-reflection (ethico-political belief in a technology of self) and ensure they appear investable to protect their professional role as entrepreneur.

Moments of affective intensity do not reveal the truth of subjects, they reveal the simplified narratives humans deliver under pressure, and illuminate the insecure selves who cling on to these narratives. But these simplified narratives are especially important to maintain when a subject is attempting to maintain the coherent, dedicated, *purposed* self that is valued by the IERM.

---

<sup>19</sup> Deleuze-inspired anthropologist Bhargupati Singh also favours the language of *intensity* in his attempt to ‘consider, or reconsider, what is meant by “quality of life”’ for the inhabitants of Rajasthan’s rural Shahab region (Singh 2015:4).

<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that attempts to express emotions always involve miscommunication, it is not that my interlocutors failed to communicate accurately, but that – as Ahmed notes – emotions are felt differently by all.

Indeed, it was through witnessing the affective intensity of my educator friends that I came to glimpse what inhabiting social entrepreneurship *feels* like. It is this tension, the tension of holding a coherent self in the fray of an affective, plural, fluid, ‘intra-active’ world of becoming that produces the affective condition of the lifeworld itself. As I articulate in detail below, the grandest contribution that affect theory makes to this thesis is through the concept of *cruel optimism* – a term which so explicitly displays the tension that arises in the valuing of purposed-leadership.

### **Cruel optimism: the subject position of an education social entrepreneur?**

‘A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ (Berlant 2011:1). I argue that desiring purposed-leadership and desiring the proliferation of the discourse of self-as-locus-of-social-change result in two undesired results for Delhi’s education reformists: (i) their projects fail to connect with the lived realities of the children they teach, (ii) their desire for self-actualisation leads to frustration and isolation.

The second point might not seem overly important: why does it matter if a few education entrepreneurs feel anxious in their drive to effect social change? But the importance of their distress, sociologically, is that their self-oriented subjectivity – in which the self is something an individual must learn to manage – is directly promoted through their education projects. These educators are role models for a whole generation of young education social activists; I explore their lives in the relation of cruel optimism to illuminate the burden of developing an image of the self based on self-reliance.

As a literary theorist, Lauren Berlant uses novels and poems to explore her concept of cruel optimism. In one analysis, she recognises how desiring sovereignty over one’s social and economic location leaves one stuck in cruel optimism. Berlant writes:

In circulation one becomes happy in an ordinary, often lovely, way, because the weight of being in the world is being distributed into space, time, noise, and other beings. When one’s sovereignty is delivered back into one’s hands, though, its formerly distributed weight becomes apparent, and the subject becomes stilled in a perverse mimesis of its enormity. (43)

Living in an everyday capitalist political economy is tiring and stressful, but it provides a stabilizing sense of ‘circulation’ that disappears if one escapes this community and ‘sovereignty is delivered back into one’s hands’.<sup>21</sup>

Under capitalism, being in circulation denotes being in life, while an inexhaustible hoard denotes being in fantasy ... But in fantasy one is stuck with one’s singular sovereignty in an inexhaustible nonrelationality. (ibid)

In Berlant’s context, it is money that people want and it is excessive wealth, once achieved, that dislocates them from the community of others who must interrelate in the market. Although this community can be tiringly normative, it is cruelly optimistic to imagine a life beyond it, because sovereignty – the state of being in control of one’s own self – is a heavy burden to bear. It is only those with sovereignty who must *choose* what to do. And it is the weight of having to choose how to spend their time and money that leaves the (newly wealthy black American) characters in Berlant’s chosen novel wholly disoriented. ‘Sovereignty’, writes Berlant, ‘while ideal, is a nightmarish burden, a psychotic loneliness’ (ibid). In capitalism, because the market dominates *all* social relations, if one releases oneself from the logic of the market, one is also cut off from social relations.

How does the fantasy of self-actualisation that overcodes my educationalists relate to Berlant’s cruel optimism? I argue that ‘self-actualisation’ is the fantasy of sovereignty that is promised to education reformers. The fantasy is that – considering these educators desire a now-normative ‘autonomous’ self (Sancho 2015; Rose 1998) – they will only gain self-actualisation when they have achieved sovereignty over their own life. But as Berlant shows – in something analogous to Hannah Arendt’s notion of exile as the ultimate human punishment (Arendt 2018 [1958]) – to be removed from the relationality of a community is a ‘nightmarish burden’.

Here is the dilemma of cruel optimism experienced by social entrepreneurs of education: they desire both (i) an autonomous sovereignty as per the cultural value of leadership and entrepreneurialism, and (ii) acceptance in a community of educators where the payment for access is to relinquish their own autonomy (their truest feelings) and embrace the collective purpose of the education mission. Social entrepreneurs desire the ‘social’ of community with a shared purpose *and* the autonomy of the entrepreneur – and the *tension* of being pulled in both directions creates *affective intensity* and cruel optimism. In this way, the term ‘social

---

<sup>21</sup>For a recent ethnographic example from South Asia where agency, autonomy – or to use Berlant’s term ‘sovereignty’ – becomes a burden for women who ‘choose’ to pursue love marriages, see Abeyasekera (2016).

entrepreneur' itself becomes a site of subjective tension, a double bind of neoliberal subjectification. The more they achieve independence as entrepreneurs, the closer they seem to self-actualisation, the more alienated and vulnerable they feel as per the community of educators from which they desire friendship and emotional support. The more they commit to the mission of Teach-Them and the IERM, the more they compare themselves to other education entrepreneurs whose professional success seems to have taken them one step closer to self-actualisation.

Just as Berlant's characters gain sovereignty (freedom from the labour market) by becoming rich, entrepreneurial IERM educationalists reach for the sovereignty promised by investing all their identification in the mission of education reform. And just as Berlant's characters are suddenly bereft from the community with which they want to enjoy their newfound wealth, IERM educators become marooned inside their own fantastical completion of autonomy by the very practice of attempting to inhabit a consistent self.

Berlant – like Butler and Barad – perceives a world where the definition of being human is being relational. As much as Berlant recognises the pain and suffering of living in the capitalist US, she also knows that winning the game of capitalism (and becoming rich) is no escape. My thesis also posits the human ontological condition as relational; I use this relational ontology framework to make sense of the lived experiences of educators whose attempts to attain autonomy and sovereignty leave them affectively tense.

How does Berlant explore 'cruel optimism'? She does so by 'providing narrative scenarios of how people learn to identify, manage, and maintain the hazy luminosity of their attachment to being x and having x' (2011:44). And this is also what my ethnography attempts. It is an ethnography of desire. It tracks educators' attachment to purposed-leadership; their desire to imagine the self as the route to social change – and explores what this means as regards the socially-driven education movement they live within. As we see in the forthcoming ethnography, not only does valuing purposed-leadership and the self-as-locus-of-social-change implicate these educator-reformers in relations of cruel optimism, but their education projects can also induce the children who they teach into relations of cruel optimism as well.

Before I confront these questions ethnographically, I provide my methodology for this study and an overview of how the chapters develop my argument.

# *Methodology and Overview*

\*

## **Methodology**

Ethnographic understanding simply means that one may glimpse oneself as one might be or might have been *under other circumstances*, and come to the realisation that knowledge and identity are emergent properties of the unstable relationship between self and other ...

Michael Jackson, *Lifeworlds: Existential Anthropology* (2013)

### **The long road to my fieldsite ...**

How did I come to research social entrepreneurs of start-up education NGOs in Delhi? It was not because there was a 'gap' in the literature, and it was not based on my deep-held fascination with South Asia. This research project took shape push-and-pull between my own history, my own heart, and my own politics.

In 2015 I found myself in Utrecht in The Netherlands, enrolled on a Master's course called Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship. The stories of heart and heartbreak that led me to the city are for another time, but what drew me to the one-year Master's in anthropology was that it involved writing an ethnographic thesis based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork. I had spent the year previous writing a travelogue as I visited a chain of intentional communities across Europe and the US. What I thought was a kind of gonzo journalism turned out to be my first experience of writing 'quick and dirty' ethnography. I went to a community for a week or so, participated in rituals and conversations, observed behaviour, wrote things down, then left and wrote them up. A Master's in anthropology, I reasoned – as long as it included fieldwork – would afford me chance to continue this method of learning. It was during my visits to communes and eco-villages that my consciousness of patriarchy began to crystallise, not least an awareness of my own self as a white middle-class privately educated

British man, and a ‘man’ who was increasingly saddened with the normative, competitive schooling to which he was subjected.

Here, as I write, I slip into a register of dissociation: the boy who was subjectified under regimes of patriarchy and British utilitarianism is spoken about in third person past. My relationship to my own subjectification is painful and important, as is clear in the presentation of the humans in this thesis, I read subjectification as continuous and relational, I read it with an openness to ‘becoming’ and change. Yet, simultaneously, I make use of biography and life history as method because I believe – as Judith Butler asserts – that our bodies congeal over time into normative shapes of socially determined meaning (Butler 1993). I, like the participants in this study, am produced by my past as much as my relationship to the present.

At the beginning of my Master’s in Utrecht I re-read Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and the messages I found resonated as strongly as when I’d first read it in my early twenties. I knew that I would spend my three-months’ fieldwork studying education projects, I just didn’t know where. As it happens when you are British and middle-class in the early 21st century, my close friend’s mother worked for a large UK-based education NGO who had just launched their first public-private partnership school outside the UK. She, the mother, was going to Delhi every few months to oversee the school’s development and help train teachers. I requested that she ask the Principal if I could visit Delhi for three months to carry out research in the school; she asked and the Principal complied. In February 2016, I flew to India for the first time. I arrived at the school on a Monday morning delighted to learn that the Principal would happily allow me to visit everyday, as long as I supported teachers in the classroom and helped with English lessons. Of the four teachers in this hybrid NGO-government primary school, two of them were connected to the Indian education NGO Teach-Them. One, Dianshi, had been placed in the school for the second year of her fellowship. The other, Evaara, was working as a teacher after finishing her fellowship the year before. Dianshi and Evaara are both still very close friends, but it was my growing relationship with Evaara that led me back to India for this PhD research.

During my Master’s fieldwork I met a host of Teach-Them fellows and ‘alumni’ – the term Teach-Them use for anyone who’s completed one their of teaching fellowships – who were experimenting with educational projects for Delhi’s marginalised children. Learning that I had a background in theatre, creative writing and storytelling, these Teach-Them educationalists

casually invited me to their classrooms to offer something to the children. Pushed out of my comfort zone, and not wanting to disappoint, I too experimented with how to engage children and planned and delivered a self-telling storytelling workshop. Less than a year later, in January 2017, after continuing my communication with Evaara and wanting an excuse to see her, I went back to Delhi. I continued to volunteer with Teach-Them fellows and alumni, and waited to see whether I would be offered funding to begin my PhD.

It was in early 2017 that I picked up a longer-term engagement with Teach-Them and facilitated a group of children to produce their own piece of theatre. The kids performed their play at Teach-Them Delhi's citywide creative festival, and I became further embedded in the network of the NGO. Soon after, I offered to do some ethnographic research for the organisation by attending their residential training program and writing a report on the process. My ostensible reason for attending was to get a head start on my upcoming PhD, but I also knew Evaara would be there, and I wanted to spend more time with her. In June 2017, I offered my last workshop to the Teach-Them network before returning to the UK to start my PhD. This was a drama and mindfulness workshop for the staff of a new Teach-Them alumni-founded NGO that I have called Clear-Space. This was my first interaction with Clear-Space, the NGO with whom I volunteered throughout my PhD fieldwork to come.

By the time I returned to Delhi in November 2018 for PhD fieldwork I had already begun conversations with Baan, the co-founder and CEO of Clear-Space. He'd seen my work as a facilitator and agreed to take me on as a volunteer drama teacher in one of the NGO's partner schools. This school, that I will call Dilip Vihar Primary School, was my primary fieldwork site during my PhD fieldwork.

### **My role as educator-researcher**

It is important for me to detail my trajectory into my PhD fieldsite because the methods I chose to research these education projects were forged within this trajectory. My first interaction with Teach-Them and Clear Space was not as a researcher but as an arts-based facilitator. Amongst the Teach-Them network in Delhi I was known dimly as 'Rich that British guy who runs theatre workshops and knows Evaara'. I did not enter the field as an unknown personality, I was embedded in a network of educators and was seen as educator first, researcher second. It is

perhaps because of this positionality that I got to know the educationalists who appear in my ethnography in the way I did. But it was also the way I got to know Teach-Them alumni that drew me to apply for a PhD in the first place. Yes, there was Evaara, a woman I had fallen in love with and with whom I wanted to build a relationship, but it was also that Teach-Them as an organisation fascinated me. There was so much passion and purpose in educators I met, there was creative flair, a risk-taking attitude, and a sense that education reform really could happen simply by young people deciding that it was what they were going to devote their lives to. I was inspired by Himani – who we will meet in Chapter 1 – the Teach-Them fellow who invited me to run a workshop for her class, who believed in my potential as a teacher: it was her faith in me that pushed me to carefully plan a storytelling workshop that I was proud of. And yet, at the same time, it is Himani who I present as the social entrepreneur of education in Delhi who seems most devoted to the theory of self as the locus of social change. It is precisely this tension which motivates the research of this thesis. The tension between my respect for how the narrative of self can be used to inspire humans to step out of their comfort zone and grow in their practice, and my discomfort with the individualism, competition and antipolitics which seems to breed in the Indian Education Reform Movement.

Again, it was precisely my similarities with Teach-Them alumni that drew me to research them. They were university educated, spoke fluent English, came from middle-class families (albeit with different incomes to my own), and reflected on themselves as people fascinated by the potential for social change. I had my anger at how school systems had failed to provide the pastoral care and creative support I desired as a child, and these educators were running poetry workshops, meditation circles, theatre programs and music classes for kids who – from what I was told by the mainstream discourse – were tragically ‘underprivileged’<sup>22</sup>.

To get closer to the lived experience of being a social entrepreneur of education in Delhi, I settled on a research methodology which allowed me to become somewhat of a social entrepreneur of education myself. I decided that I would run a set of retreats for social entrepreneurs that would allow them space to reflect on their own journey as founders and educationalists. By bringing education entrepreneurs together, I would increase their potential

---

<sup>22</sup> I personally refuse to describe the children who Teach-Them work with as ‘underprivileged’ because it erases the complex culture and society of working-class and lower-caste communities, in India and elsewhere. I prefer the term ‘marginalised’ as it refers to how normative middle-class culture abjects the practices of lower-income communities. I prefer the term ‘lower-income’ as it is more empirically accurate: the families with which Teach-Them work, on the whole, *do* make less money than the families from which Teach-Them fellows come.



for collaboration – a value they promoted through their education programs, but which seemed, when it came to running their education NGOs, strangely absent. Although there is a flush of financial investment in the education development sector in India, there is also a flush of start-up NGOs. Founders fret over pitches for funding which could make or break their socially-oriented education initiative. As much as the IERM at large, and Teach-Them specifically, is a community, it is also a space of fierce competition: successful founders are praised, and failures are forgotten.

By launching a little enterprise of my own, I attempted to experience the anxiety and excitement of being a founder. Of course, the experiment was in part facetious – I had secured funding for my PhD, my main professional project, and if I failed at my education enterprise I would have other methods to fall back on. And yet, in the spirit of auto-ethnography (Ellis 2004a) I wanted to continue my role both as an educator to children (as I did by teaching drama in the Dilip Vihar primary school) and as an entrepreneur who risks launching an initiative of my own. The result was the Social Entrepreneur Circle, a series of five three-hour evening workshops where Delhi's education entrepreneurs could share their reflections on concepts such 'resilience', 'caste', or the term 'underprivileged'.<sup>23</sup> I began with dreams of running full weekend retreats with twenty attendees, but I ended up with five sessions in which three or four overworked social entrepreneurs graciously gave me some of their time. Nevertheless, the experiment worked: I had a small taste of how much energy it takes to launch an initiative off your own back, and I produced some of my most telling data (mainly with Baan in Chapter 3) through the conversations of the Circle.

We are all on a journey, and as Michael Jackson puts it in the lead quote to this section, not only could I too, under other circumstances, have become an Indian social entrepreneur of education, I also acknowledge that it is through the ethnographic process – both the fieldwork and the writing – that I have 'come to the realisation that knowledge and identity are emergent properties of the unstable relationship between self and other'.

---

<sup>23</sup> I provide a fuller description of the nature of the Social Entrepreneur Circle at the beginning of Chapter 3.

### **Multi-sited ethnography in one city**

As mentioned above, my central fieldsite during fieldwork was the Dilip Vihar primary school in South Delhi. Three times a week I would spend the full day in school, 8am - 3pm, teaching drama lessons and observing the NGO at work. Here, participant-observation was my most consistent method, with the occasional semi-structured interview with government-employed teachers. Before starting fieldwork, I aimed to include the government teachers as research subjects in my study. I dropped this aim in the write up stage because I realised I had failed to build meaningful relationships with the teachers, and failed to generate rich enough data with them. It turned out that my role as volunteer with the NGO Clear-Space proscribed my intimacy with the teachers; there was a rift in the school between the NGO habitus and that of the teachers, and my location in the NGO camp intensified the social impasse. Furthermore, my Hindi language skills were never quite good enough to hold relaxed conversations with the teachers. Although my Hindi improved immensely by working in the Hindi-medium Dilip Vihar school (I taught all my drama classes in Hindi, first with a co-teacher, and later solo), it wasn't nuanced enough to conduct more complex introspective conversations, like the ones I had in English with Baan, Divya, Arushi and Prashant, the protagonists of this thesis. In addition, gender and culture difference was at play. All the teachers in the school, bar one, were married women. Most were aged over 50, lived in joint families, and had been employed as government teachers for over twenty years. Furthermore, none had been subjected to Teach-Them's philosophy of self-as-locus-of-social-change, and therefore were not involved in the discourse of introspection for purposed-leadership which became my central topic. Ultimately, my thesis became solely focused on members of the Indian Education Reform Movement, and these teachers – despite the wishes of Teach-Them and Clear-Space – never quite accepted the premises of this movement.

My second central fieldsite, after the school, was the office of the NGO Clear-Space. It was here that NGO managers held training and reflection days for the school-based teams. I visited the office around ten times during my fieldwork, almost always for day-long workshops. It was here where I co-produced data – this time as more participant than facilitator – and where stories from the sections on Divya and Baan are drawn. Whereas Hindi was the lingua franca of the school, English was the main language of Clear-Space – just as it was at Teach-Them. Again, in the office, participant observation was my central method.

My final key site of ethnographic data production was marketplaces, coffee shops and other NGO offices where I met the many educationalists with whom I scheduled semi-structured interviews. As recruitment for my Social Entrepreneur Circles, I met with around ten different education NGO founders all around Delhi. To some I offered to run workshops for the staff of their organisations, others I met once for coffee and never saw them again. Although none of these people appear directly in my thesis, the information and understanding I gained from them has informed my research in ways I cannot fully track. Fieldwork is a rolling process, and, especially as my departure from the field coincided with the outbreak of COVID-19, I could not return to say farewell to the many educators who I'd met.

There is one educator who I got to know mainly through semi-structured life history interviews, who has a central place in this thesis. This is Prashant, the founder of Kshamta, and the only central figure of my thesis who did not complete a teaching fellowship at Teach-Them. I met Prashant through an alumni reunion retreat of another NGO with which I volunteered, but which I have decided to leave on the sidelines of this study. Again, it was my identification with Prashant's anger and disappointment at his schooling that led me to centralise his story in my thesis. Although Prashant and I may disagree on the ethics of capitalism and the theory that one's individual purpose is the route to social change, we are both motivated in our work by the pain we feel looking back at an education system that underserved us. In exchange for the time he spent with me, or perhaps just because we became friends, I helped Prashant write funding grants for his burgeoning education start-up. The final fieldsite which appears in this thesis is the NGO-run school with which Prashant's organisation partners, and in which we see him offering his 'speech to the boys' in the final vignette of the ethnography.

### **Storied lives and biographical anthropology**

Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life, they are the means by which identities may be fashioned.

Rosenwald and Ochberg, *Storied Lives* (1992)

Part of my argument is that narrative self-telling is a performative act that produces a sense of enterprise and leadership. By narrativizing their trajectory towards becoming entrepreneurial

educationalists, my interlocutors produce themselves as agential subjects with conscious drive and dogged determination. This practice of narrating oneself into a subject with an ‘autonomous’ self is woven into the neoliberal narrative of self-selling which characterises the IERM. Education entrepreneurs must present themselves as investable subjects, as ‘persons’ who deserve funding and support. Telling one’s life story therefore becomes an act of survival – the more clearly one displays their dedication to ending education inequity, and the more clearly this dedication is placed in a personal narrative of overcoming adversity, then – or so educators believe – the more likely it is they will be invested in.

The medium of self-telling is linked to the production of leadership; it is embedded in the mythology of the social entrepreneur. By isolating each of their stories in a chapter or part chapter, I’ve tried to echo the educationalists’ desire for a coherent, linear narrative. These are people who in public must present as ‘unitary subjects’ – as consistent, reliable, and therefore safe to invest in. As much as I am interested in presenting the partiality, relationality, and ‘intra-activity’ of these subjects, I am also drawn to presenting them in way that allows their own presentation of themselves to breathe.

Arnold and Blackburn suggest that one reason South Asianist scholars have historically been neglectful of individual life histories in their research is because of the ‘collectivity’ of the region (2004:2). Perhaps the age of the ‘active enterprising citizen’ (Gooptu 2013) has drawn researchers to take seriously how individuals experience their sense of self, and how telling stories about themselves is a key practice in this sense making. Chapter 5 of Sancho’s (2015) monograph – where he highlights the self-producing self-telling of three final year schoolboys – is a good example.

I find it important to highlight how each educationalist has a specific family, gender, social, caste and economic experience that have influenced their journey towards social entrepreneurship and a desire for purposed-leadership. I follow Beatty (2018) in my practice of biographical ethnography, as he writes, ‘Biographers enter the narrow circle of their subjects, dogging their footsteps, absorbed into their world often to the point of total identification’ (2018:30).<sup>24</sup> I chose to study social entrepreneurs of education because I

---

<sup>24</sup> It is haunting that Beatty’s defence in 2018 of biographical anthropology echoes Malinowski’s own promotion of the method in his germinal text against the ‘bastard algebra of kinship’ published in 1930

identified with their passion and obsession for creating better education provision. As I show in a postscript to the closing ethnographic chapter (Chapter 4), I too desire the sense of self that my research subjects structure around purposed-leadership, and this thesis provides elements of autobiography to temper my biographical examinations.

### **Impressionist ethnography**

As foregrounded by analysing the work of Nikolas Rose (1998), the theory of self that circulates in Teach-Them seems heavily psychologised. As Rose argues, the domination of the ‘psy’ disciplines has facilitated the proliferation of the idea that the self is ‘autonomous’. It is because the educators who I worked with take the psychological self so seriously that I chose methods – both in fieldwork and in writing – that aim to give voice to the reality of the lifeworlds of these educators.

In fieldwork, I gathered much data from group sharing circles where individuals were encouraged to express their doubts, insecurities, fears, and dreams. I also encouraged interlocutors into spontaneous self-telling, asking them directly how their past had influenced their decisions to join the education revolution.

In writing, I’ve kept large chunks of verbatim speech intact, preferring to weave my analysis around the voices of my interlocutors so as to allow the structure of their self-reflective thinking to shine off the page. But there is also hyper-realism here at times: as with some speeches from Baan, and the poem about Prashant, I’ve used my own literary prerogative to stylise the representation of my interlocutors into what Johnny Saldaña might call a ‘presentation’ that ‘dramatizes the data’ (Saldaña 2005).<sup>25</sup>

---

(Malinowski 1930). Perhaps this echoes a dialectical trend in the discipline where ethnographers flow between practices of capturing ethnographic minutiae and more structural ways of analysing lifeworlds.

<sup>25</sup> “An ethnodrama, the written script, consists of dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected through interviews, participant observation field notes, journal entries, and/or print and media artifacts such as diaries, television broadcasts, newspaper articles, and court proceedings. Simply put, this is dramatizing the data.” (Saldaña 2005:30)

As a theatre maker who taught children's theatre during fieldwork, and who used participatory theatre as research method, I am sensitive to the importance of form, tone and narrative in my attempts to produce an anthropological text that gives an honest *impression* of my lived experience of fieldwork.<sup>26</sup> Here, I used the term 'impression' as it is used to describe the art movement of *impressionism*, where the painter's experience of an event is the data she uses to produce a representation of that event, rather than a 'realist' painter who might try to accurately (photographically) depict light. I take my role as an artistic ethnographer seriously and believe the quality of my subjectivity is a benefit to the writing, not a detriment.

### **Ethics and affect theory**

Part of the reason why relational ontology and the conception of partial, contingent subjectivities attracts me is because it draws us towards an understanding of relational ethics. Spinoza's *Ethics* is the originary text of this ethical position (Deleuze 2007; Braidotti 2013; Sedgwick 2003)<sup>27</sup>, and it is indeed Spinoza's articulation of 'affect' that serves as the base for explorations of affect theory (Gregg and Seigworth 2009).

Karen Barad helps translate the theory of affect into a methodological approach for enacting social research. She invokes the term 'ethico-onto-epistem-ology' to illuminate the interdependency of ethics, ontology and epistemology in regards to the practice of engaging in (scientific) knowledge production (2007:90). Her point, deeply influenced by Donna Haraway's work on relational ethics (1991; 2007), is that if 'we' as researchers are materially entangled with all other 'intra-activities' that constitute the world, then any action we take, any label we write, any interpretation we offer, are all logically and necessarily ethical acts. There can be no statement, no observation, no production of knowledge that is free from ethical judgement, because everything we do necessarily reconstitutes both ourselves, and that which makes us – that is, all 'others' which have been historically deemed by Western humanist philosophy as 'Other' and 'distinct'.

I take Barad's articulation of 'ethico-onto-epistem-ology' seriously as regards my research as an ethical ethnographer. To say whether my methods and questions are indeed ethical is not

---

<sup>26</sup> Cf Van Maanen (2011:7) for a slightly different take on 'impressionist' ethnography

<sup>27</sup> Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* (2003) also makes links between affect theory and Buddhism.

for me to judge, they can be judged only by those most directly affected by them, namely, my participants. Two research methods have been integral to my attempts to be true to ethico-onto-epistemology: Participatory Action Research and autoethnography, which I explore in turn below.

### **Participatory Action Research**

Historically, Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been characterised by researchers helping their participants to identify pressing social or political issues, critically reflecting on these issues with these participants, and subsequently helping to design a socio-political action that helps them overcome this problem (McTaggart 1991; McIntyre 2008). PAR is especially relevant to my Baradian ‘intra-active’ relational ethnography because, as McIntyre makes clear in her paraphrase of Robin McTaggart, ‘PAR becomes a living dialectic process, changing the researcher, the participants, and the situations in which they act’ (McIntyre 2008: 1). PAR is also particularly suited to researchers of education, especially those studying adult education in developing countries (Fals-Borda 1987; Swantz 1982) including India (Tandon 1981), but also in the West. Traditionally, these participatory studies have focused on adults with a lack of literacy or advanced formal education. More recently, action research with teachers has been popularised by John Elliot (2001), who operationalised Stenhouse’s (1975) image of ‘teachers as researchers’ to build collaborative research that generates critical reflections on education especially by highlighting the ‘situated understanding’ of in-service teachers.

I position my research at the intersection of these two articulations of PAR. The IERM and Teach-Them educators in my study did at times elicit my help to further their enterprises, but they certainly did not lack advanced formal education. Instead, Delhi’s Teach-Them network saw me as an arts-based practitioner who could enhance their programs with pedagogical knowledge. At the same time, I wanted to use these arts methods (and especially participatory theatre) to continue the tradition of building critical consciousness, especially the Freirean kind that inspired Orlando Fals-Borda. Indeed, Paulo Freire is the homologous link between the participatory action researcher Fals-Borda and the participatory political theatre practitioner Augusto Boal, whose techniques I used in the Social Entrepreneur Circle which became my central PAR research method.

In his early work, in the 1960s and 1970s, Augusto Boal aimed to use participatory theatre in a similar way to Paulo Freire (1975), to help the ‘oppressed’ recognise the source of their oppression (i.e. the upper class) and use role-play to practice ways to confront their economic inequality. Later, from the late 1980s to the 2000s, Augusto Boal developed his Forum Theatre to account for a more Foucauldian understanding of power, that is, to help individuals recognise that they were often both the oppressor and the oppressed. This kind of theatre was broadly labelled ‘The Rainbow of Desire’, and aimed at delivering a psychoanalytical, therapeutic self-discovery more than Marxian class-based consciousness. Boal saw this psycho-therapeutic theatre as equally political to his earlier Theatre of the Oppressed and expected politically-motivated practitioners to choose carefully as to which of his methods were most appropriate to the community of their participants (Boal 1995:20).

The majority of Teach-Them alumni in Delhi come from middle-class families who are not, in Marxian terms, the ‘oppressed’. They are, however, individuals who value self-knowledge and processes of self-reflection. Keen to explore the viability of PAR with a group of educators who were already committed to the proliferation of education for social change, I decided to engage Boal’s Rainbow of Desire participatory theatre to provoke participants to reflect on how their partial subjectivities meant that they could shift from being the ‘oppressed’ in one social interaction to being the ‘oppressor’ in the next. This PAR method was especially effective with Baan in the Social Entrepreneur Circles I display in Chapter 3. It was also these exchanges that allowed Baan and I to reflect on experiences of masculinity that overshadow my engagement with autoethnography.

### **Autoethnography**

In contrast to relational ontological understandings of subjectivity, positivist humanist philosophy posits a distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’ which presupposes individual humans as bounded entities who may or may not be affected by the people, things and places that surround them (Davies 2014). As a researcher drawn to relational ontology, I recognise that I am entangled with the methods and findings of my study. I believe that ethnography is enhanced through the interrogation and exposure of the vulnerabilities and biases illuminated when a writer-researcher attempts to represent their own condition, beliefs and paradigms that arise both as they work in the field and while they struggle to textually ‘capture’ it (Ellis 2004;



Behar 1996). I scatter my thesis with moments of my own fallibility, inconsistency, and insecurity that remind the reader that I am also a flawed member of this Indian Education Reform Movement.

With the above theory in mind, I made a set of methodological decisions. First, I decided to work as a primary school teacher in a school run by an educational social enterprise in partnership with the local Delhi government. By inhabiting the role of teacher, albeit partial, I could compare my own emotional experience of school with that of the NGO educators alongside me. I had my own personal relationship with the Principal, the other teachers, the students, the sweltering Delhi heat, and the choking winter pollution. At the same time, I brought my own specific experiences to this role: homesickness and the exhaustion of learning a new language being two of the memories that linger in my body still now.

Apart from my role as teacher, my time with NGO educators in the school, in the office, and in the Social Entrepreneur Circles allowed me to reflect on my own reasons for conducting a three-year PhD about education in India. As I interrogated their motivations for becoming socially-conscious educators, they questioned my reasons for choosing to be an anthropologist of education. My response to this allowed me to introduce my participants – who were quickly becoming friends – to some of the political and social theory that helped me reflect on myself. I shared how I personally feel the pressures of neoliberal subjectification; how I feel as if I have been directed by discourse to act, think, and feel with a neoliberal rationality and operationality. I tried to transmit how I feel inhabited by the desire to produce, to be efficient, to be highly respected for my actions, to be mobile, to travel and to be accepted wherever I go; and how I, like others (McGuigan 2014; Verdouw 2017) believe these desires are characteristic of neoliberal subjectivities. I admit, I rarely used theoretical terms like ‘neoliberal subjectivities’, but I tried to make my own politics and beliefs clear, while all the time remaining open to the observations of my interlocutors. My ultimate contribution to autoethnography comes in the postscript to Chapter 4 where I display the intermittent envy I feel for the lives my interlocutors.

### **Positionality**

One danger of framing my ethics and methods within a relational ontological understanding of humans and objects is that this philosophy can be used to obscure the socially felt reality of

historical and structural privilege that is most often explored through categorisation. Thinking relations before entities can be productive in imagining new ethics, but to ignore how the socially-produced categories of gender, race, sexuality, and caste inform my role as a researcher would be naive and irresponsible.

In terms of social and structural category, I am a white, middle-class, heterosexual thirty-five-year-old man from the UK who has been funded by the British government to complete university-based doctoral research. Being read as 'white' in India allowed me easy access to certain social spaces and a certain level of deference. The fact that my whiteness is a token of jest amongst me and my Indian friends is only further proof of how skin colour is important to the Delhi society in which I lived. My ongoing romantic relationship with a woman from India who is currently living in the UK is a daily reminder of the structural racism that pervades the UK society in which I was raised. All my relationships in Delhi were structured by my whiteness as something read by my participants, and by the 'otherness' through which I was taught to view people of colour. Nevertheless, the members of the IERM who became my research subjects viewed themselves as part of an international education movement where the reality of skin colour is dismissed. This does not mean individual participants were indifferent to global political race movements such as Black Lives Matter, but that, although the difference of my British whiteness was always visible, the prevailing attitude was to accept this difference as a surface event and not deconstruct it further.

In terms of gender, it is difficult from my male subject position to speak accurately of the intensity of patriarchy that also pervades Delhi society. I do not know how it feels to be a woman in this city but the countless stories from both local and foreign friends tell me that the structural integrity of masculine supremacy is difficult to overstate. Furthermore, my growing awareness of how the patriarchal ideology of my upbringing (in school, family, and the mediascape) continues to influence my daily social relations contributed to my choice to study education projects, and educational leaders, in the first place. My experiences with Baan and Prashant in the later part of this thesis are products of my processing of my subjection to masculine norms as I explore how they negotiate the masculine expectations of their society.

## **Ethics again**

Despite my affection for an ontological theory which I believe has the potential to help us imagine and enact a more ethical world, I am aware of other ethical dilemmas that stalk my fieldwork and write-up.

My educationalist interlocutors are full-time professionals who depend upon their salary for their livelihood; I am a researcher who was not paid by the school or NGO but instead financially independent. I was careful not use my position in school as a way to lead teachers to take pedagogical or political risks that could have jeopardised their employment. Even as I was part of a community that encouraged ethico-political reflection, I tried to be careful not to encourage radical behaviour that has lasting negative consequences for my participants.

Confidentiality and anonymity are also essential within the ‘no-harm-to-informants’ principle stipulated by both the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA) and the ESRC (ASA 2011; ESRC 2018). Although it is easy enough to change the names of the participants, schools, and NGOs with which I work, due to the unique and pioneering nature of the projects it could still be clear to which organisations and entrepreneurs my pseudonyms refer. Considering the participatory nature of my research, I hope to maintain a strong bond with these organisations and people, and I hope I have found a suitable way to mask their identity without compromising the quality of my academic research. I have maintained dialogues with my participants during the write-up stage and offered them the chance at ‘ethnographic refusal’, a process in which ‘researchers and research participants *together* decide not to make particular information available for use within the academy’ (Zahara 2016). Since returning to the UK, I have sent extracts of my ethnography to my interlocutors and had conversations with them over phone or email to check the accuracy of personal-historical facts, and to locate any details they felt might compromise their professional development.

# Overview of the Ethnographic Chapters

## The four ethnographic chapters of the thesis

*Chapter 1: the production of the discourse.* I present a thick description of Teach-Them's month-long residential teacher-training program. I show how the idea of an inner self and the theory of the self-as-the-locus-of-social-change are embedded in the pedagogy and propaganda through which the NGO-movement trains new members. I use this chapter to analyse this theory of self, and elucidate how the philosophy of objectivist positivism in which it is couched is directly linked to the neoliberal imaginary of the global development of education discourse. I then provide two ethnographic snapshots to show how the philosophy of the self promoted by Teach-Them continues to influence how Teach-Them alumni understand their role as equality-driven educators. I conclude with an extended reflection of how the value of purposed-leadership becomes the object of desire which can lead educationalists into relations of cruel optimism as per their role as education reformists.

*Chapter 2: how the discourse is taught to peers and students.* I introduce the government primary school in which I conducted a large part of my ethnographic fieldwork. I show how Arushi, the NGO-employed 'School Leader', practices purposed-leadership by taking on the responsibility of training junior NGO members in the practice of being self-aware and self-directed. I juxtapose her attempts to invest new values in her colleagues with the realpolitik pragmatism she uses to gain influence and micro-political power with the government teachers, Principal, and senior management officials of the government school. In the second part of the chapter, I showcase how Arushi's line manager, Schools Director Divya, negotiates her desire to practice purposed-leadership, first by fantasising about how all her juniors could learn to 'self-manage', and second by designing a 'social-emotional learning' curriculum that affords her direct influence over the ethical development of school children.

*Chapter 3: the affective effects of the discourse.* I focus on the figure who most clearly represents the practice of valuing purposed-leadership as a route to self-actualisation: the education social entrepreneur. Here, I explore my intimate relationship with Baan, the founder of Clear-Space – the NGO that employs Arushi and Divya from Chapter 2 – and chart how his desire to be recognised as valuable by the Teach-Them community and IERM lead him to

excessive attempts at self-knowing and self-awareness. I reflect on how these attempts seem to disappoint him and leave him bitter towards the possibility of being ‘ethical’ and ‘successful’ all at once. I show how Baan turns quantitative methods of assessment onto an examination of the self and show how a preoccupation with self-evaluation can have intense affective effects. I conclude by showing Baan in a relation of cruel optimism as his desire to gain acceptance through dedication to the mission triggers him to act against his political belief in feminism.

*Chapter 4: a hyper social entrepreneur, and the effects of the discourse on students.* I focus on another young male leader of the IERM, Prashant, whose involvement in the movement is motivated not by his training at Teach-Them but through his experiences of family, tech start-ups, and the desire to be ‘believed in as a person’. This is not to say that the other educationalists in my study are motivated by Teach-Them and Teach-Them only, but that the intense self-narrativization that Prashant practices provides a clearer ethnographic opportunity with which to make this link. I show how Prashant’s conception of self-as-locus-of-social-change is so unmediated that he acts with a messianic mission to promote this philosophy. I show how the intensity of Prashant’s belief in the self-as-locus-of-social-change leads him away from practising the social-emotional learning his organisation promotes. This is the clearest instance of cruel optimism: as the thing which Prashant so desires is made less accessible by his desire for its fruition. I end the chapter with an autoethnographic reflection which presents my own desire to embody the values and skills that my educationalist interlocutors display, and the personal anxieties that surround this position.

## **Chapter order and narrative arcs**

The order of the chapters is a conscious attempt to produce two distinct narrative arcs of the thesis:

1) *Immanent to transcendent.* The chapters of the thesis shift from immanence to transcendence as I explore the lifeworlds of my entrepreneurial educationists. I begin with an ethnographically rich representation of a collective training centre to highlight how important the production of *community* is to Teach-Them. The fellows are together, they are a team, they are a cohort. Chapter 2 shows the difficulty of maintaining this sense of community in a smaller NGO, and one that cannot invest in a five-week residential training program for new joiners. Nevertheless,

the leadership team of Clear-Space work hard to generate a sense of community and *family* amongst employees of the NGO, and the immanence of both Arushi and Divya's work *in school* is clear. Chapter 3 presents a further step removed from the immanence of community and the daily workings of teaching children: we see how Baan feels misunderstood in his position as co-founder, and experiences a sense of isolation. We track how his attempts to seek transcendence from the daily scrutiny of being an NGO founder draws him to desire the fantasy of escaping this relationality through the luminary position of fame. Chapter 4 displays a subject whose desire for transcendence is even more poignant: this is an educationalist who has no experience of actually teaching children (he isn't a Teach-Them alumnus) and has the grandest designs for how education can empower them. My reason for presenting this arc is to show how much can be gained from the texture of the everyday experience of *practising* teaching and facilitation. I worry that the desire to practice purposed-leadership draws individuals away from the immediate experience of seeing children learn, a distance which distorts their ability to view what their grand designs for education policy change might actually achieve.

2) *Collective to individual*. Parallel to the shift from immanence to transcendence is a shift from the collective to the individual, and the effects this shift has on one's ability to think relationally. The value of the Teach-Them training Centre displayed in Chapter 1 is that – despite attempts to standardise fellows – the diversity of personalities present ensures a respect for how every teacher teaches differently and is indeed an individual in some way. Ironically, the more an educationalist imagines themselves to have autonomy the *less* diversity they seem to be able to swallow. At scale, education projects need to be 'one-size-fits-all'. We see the beginnings of this logic in the suite of *values* Divya enshrines in Clear-Space's Student Vision, and the culmination of this practice in Prashant's in-school speech to teenage boys. For Prashant, just as he is asking the boys to be true to themselves, his desire to ensure they devote themselves to social change obscures the individual differences of each and flattens their personalities into the subject position of minion for the cause. It seems the more one centralises one's importance as a leader, the less space there is to appreciate the multivalence of experience which collective, relational living promotes.

## Chapter 1.

### *Teach-Them: the origins of purposed-leadership*

*There is a power lying hidden in man, by the use of which he can rise to higher and better things. There is in man a greater Self, than transcends the finite self of the sense-man, even as the mountain towers above the plain.*

Henry Thomas Hamblin

*If one is observant, one can see that our whole activity is self-centred. We are thinking about ourselves endlessly: about our health, that we must meditate, that we must change; we want a better Job, with more money, a better relationship. "I want to attain enlightenment" "I must achieve something in this life"- "me" and "my life", my worries, my problems. This eternal preoccupation with oneself is going on all the time; we are devoted to ourselves.*

J. Krishnamurti

*You've got to search for the hero inside yourself  
Search for the secrets you hide  
Search for the hero inside yourself  
Until you find the key to your life*

Heather Small, M People

\*

# Introduction to Chapter 1

## Overview of the Chapter

How does a person develop an image of self? What happens when people believe that self-awareness and self-discipline are the key to social change? This chapter interrogates what selfhood means to young middle-class educationalists in India, and how selfhood is used as a concept to direct the energy of these young people into serving a specific social cause. I argue that Teach-Them, one of the Indian Education Reform Movement's most influential NGOs, leans on and reproduces the concept of autonomous selfhood to support the induction and motivation of new recruits into the movement.

Through a rigorous collective training program, which I will call the 'Centre', new Teach-Them recruits are expected to at once locate an independent inner self and devote the energy of this self to the mission of the NGO. During the first few weeks of initiation into Teach-Them, 'fellows'<sup>28</sup> are flattened by the magnitude of the social 'problem' which drives Teach-Them's work: there are literally millions of Indian children who do not have access to quality schooling.

Teach-Them present the solution to this problem as twofold: (1) fellows must submit to the methods of Teach-Them, they must unquestioningly commit to Teach-Them's pedagogy and educational theory, and accept the fact that for the two years of their fellowship their sole purpose will be to lead their group of school children the best they can; (2) fellows must accept the theory that social change occurs most effectively when individuals decide to develop their 'selves' towards solving specific problems that hinder the provision of equitable education in India.

The dual aspect of Teach-Them's training process leaves fellows with a specific two-pronged desire: the desire to become purposed-leaders. In this conceptual assemblage, the drive to find a 'purpose' and the psychological satisfaction of performing 'leadership' both work together

---

<sup>28</sup> As the term 'fellow' is commonly used to describe anyone who takes part in a formal, structured fellowship, I have decided to keep the same word which the organisation Teach-Them actually use.



and pull apart. Fellows become addicted to the sense of meaning they get from leading children, and yet are driven to transcend the limits of the teacher role to create a larger ‘impact’. The concept of purposed-leadership, and how it operates as a ‘value’ for the Teach-Them community will develop over the course of this thesis.

In this chapter, I first engage two scholars who have researched Teach-Them and who help provide an overview to the organisation at large. I then provide an ethnography of life at Teach-Them’s training ‘Centre’ followed by an outline of the theory of selfhood which undergirds Teach-Them’s lifeworld in which the self is the locus of social change.

In the second part, I provide ethnographic snapshots of those who have completed their fellowship and who carry the theory of self as locus of social change into their future education initiatives. It is these snapshots that lead into the ethnography proper, the central three chapters of this thesis (Chapters 2-4) that provide an analysis of the lifeworlds of Teach-Them ‘alumni’ and affiliates who have chosen to further Teach-Them’s mission by launching and running entrepreneurial education start-up NGOs. The chapter ends with a fuller explanation of ‘purposed-leadership’ and an analysis of the relationship between Teach-Them’s fantasy of self-actualisation and the tension of neoliberal subjectivity it produces.

### **Framing Teach-Them**

Before I embark on my own ethnographic analysis, it is useful to highlight how Teach-Them has been described by two key educational scholars – the prominent sociologist of education, Stephen Ball, and Indian scholar Vidya Subramanian, who completed her PhD (V. Subramanian 2017) on Teach-Them’s Delhi operations. Ball (2016) uses Teach-Them and its network of affiliated persons and organisations as a case study for a new sociological method of ‘following policy’ in education. Ball and his research team interviewed a handful of individuals who were seen to have immense influence over what one of these respondents called the Indian Education Reform Movement (IERM). Ball picks up ‘IERM’ as an ‘indigenous’ term and uses it to explore how the movement operates, who is part of it, and the nature of relations between its members. He argues that those in the network hold a ‘shared epistemic sensibility’ and operate with a ‘neoliberal rationality ... that deploys the techniques of investment, business innovation and performance management as methods for the re-

culturation and re-form of public education’ (Ball 2016a:553). He also identifies Public Private Partnerships, entrepreneurship and leadership as ‘silver bullet’ solutions which appeal to this ‘Indian Education Reform Movement’. For Ball, the ‘epistemic sensibility’ shared by members of this movement – investment banker philanthropists, management consultants turned to corporate social responsibility (CSR), visionary NGO founders – is one focused on metrics and positivist empiricism. Ball quotes an article from the representative of a key corporate grant making foundation, also a member of the IERM, to highlight his point,

It’s actually for us like the DNA of the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation to be very outcomes-focused and results-oriented, [this] comes from our founders, they were very clear that whatever philanthropic work they were doing they wanted to ensure that it brought about a measurable change in, outcomes of their target beneficiaries. (Ball 2016a:558)

Stephen Ball has spent the last 20 years writing about the neoliberalisation of global education policy. His 2016 article is not an attempt to prove that organisations like Teach-Them are heavily influenced by the ‘epistemic sensibility’ and ‘neoliberal rationality’ of their funders but that the *personal* and *social* connections between the members of a network like IERM need greater ethnographic attention. If members of the IERM share similar political and social worldviews, how does this come to pass? I argue that the Teach-Them training Centre produces a subjectifying discourse that induces new educationalists to view the self as the locus of social change.

V. Subramanian (2018) provides an analysis of the development of Teach-Them that engages with Stephen Ball’s (2016) call to better understand the circulation of education policy in India. She identifies Teach-Them’s links to its American parent organisation, and notes how the latter ‘is centred around the core values of leadership and “neoliberal social entrepreneurship”’ (2018:25). Below, I support Subramanian’s observations and show how Teach-Them centralise ‘leadership’ during their annual training Centre for new fellows. Subramanian also provides a neat summary of how Teach-Them recruit teaching fellows, a description in harmony with my own data:

School teaching was not seen as a lucrative career option for most upper-middle-class college students who were moving into the more popular and better-paid professions of

engineering, business, management and media. It thus became imperative to project the fellowship as one that not only allowed an individual to undergo the experience of ‘doing good’ but also offered the opportunity of honing aspects of ‘leadership’ that allowed college students to capitalise on these experiences as they moved into alternative careers following the fellowship ... (2018:31)

Furthermore, Subramanian correctly summarises the relationship between corporate funders and education development in India. For corporates, she notes,

education largely encompasses English language-based literacy, mathematics and vocational and technical skills. The key agent in transmitting these ‘skills’ to students is the schoolteacher. This has led to corporates paying considerable attention to school teaching as a crucial input in improving quality in the school system. (2018:28).

In relation to the influence of funders, she notes that organisations like Teach-Them ‘employ a managerialist approach to education where the schoolteacher is envisioned as a technician imparting literacy and numeracy skills. Teaching is framed within an ‘input–output’ model, where teaching practices need to produce the desired results’ (ibid). She retrospectively concludes that, ‘the presence of these managerialistic NGOs ... implied that ‘problems’ in education were now to be resolved within a new ecosystem of knowledge and practices that valued public management, leadership and entrepreneurialism’ (ibid).

It was reassuring to me when I discovered the work of Vidya Subramanian because her exploration of Teach-Them has led her to similar conclusions to my own, but there is a crucial way in which our observations differ – part of which is perhaps due to method. Although her work is ethnographic, Subramanian relies largely on interviews, discourse analysis and archival methods to develop her argument. In this chapter I use participant observation from within the daily workings of Teach-Them to argue that Teach-Them do not aim to train teachers to be imparters of skills, and do not much care for how well fellows actually perform as teachers. Although they do frame education inequity as a ‘problem’ to be solved, they don’t prioritise training fellows to be good problem solvers. Instead, they seek to change how fellows conceptualise selfhood. They do not prioritise technical skill as the main aim of their education development mission, but instead prioritise how a teacher – or anybody – develops the self-belief to see themselves as the origin of social change. This is where Teach-Them differ from the corporate sponsors who fund their projects and with whom – as part of the same ‘Indian

Education Reform Movement’ – they share a neoliberal rationality that promotes leadership and entrepreneurship. The neoliberal rationality of Teach-Them transcends the purportedly atheistic humanism of tech magnate philanthropists, like Bill Gates or Michael Dell, and incorporates a quasi-spiritual understanding of the self as a source of endless power.<sup>29</sup>

It is the complexity of the Teach-Them assemblage that makes it such an alluring object of ethnographic analysis. If the organisation indeed operated as a prosthesis or extension of the metrics-based positivist materialism of the global education discourse – as described by Lingard and Rizvi (2010) – then the Teach-Them alumni who finish their fellowships and launch education social enterprises would not make such fascinating friends and research subjects. It was impossible for me to spend time with these Teach-Them alumni entrepreneur educationalists and not feel inspired by their devotion and belief. I feel grateful for the work of Ball and Subramanian – and the education policy discipline in which they write – as it provides support against which I can prop up my own argument. But my own argument is a different one, couched within a different discipline. I explore what happens to those young people who experience subjectification within the Teach-Them community and how they operate as subjects in the world thereafter. I argue that Teach-Them induces fellows to believe that their own selves are the engines by which social change occurs, and – in actual fact – it is not their skills which are important to the success of social change, but *who they are as people*. Let us dive into the Teach-Them training Centre and see how some of these people are formed.

## The Teach-Them training Centre

### My arrival at the Teach-Them Centre 2017

‘Tamma Tamma Loge! Tamma Tamma Loge Tamma!’ is what I’m singing at the top of my voice, at least, what I’m meant to be singing. I’m dancing in the summer rain amongst a circle of young people who all seem to know every word. Just as I grasp my mouth around the syllables of the chorus, another song starts up spontaneously from the group. I watch amazed as everyone shifts between the tunes without missing a beat, thirty 20-somethings spinning and

---

<sup>29</sup> The first two lead quotes to this chapter provide hints as to the origins to some of this spiritualist interpretation of self.

singing as their bare feet slap the concrete yard of the university compound, their *chappals* tossed aside along with their inhibitions. I feel a surge of community and acceptance, a resonance with these humans I met only five or six days earlier. I barely know the language they sing in, and I don't recognise any of the songs, but no-one gives me a second glance as they immerse themselves in what feels like an ecstatic and organic ritual initiating a new sense of family. They are the Delhi cohort of 2017, and I have come to their training institute to see what Teach-Them try to make of them.

\*

In 2017, after spending around four months volunteering as a drama teacher with the Delhi branch of Teach-Them, I asked to attend the Teach-Them fellow Training Centre in Pune. I would offer an ethnographic report of the workings of the Centre in exchange for free accommodation, food, and transport. This year, like all years until the COVID pandemic, the Centre was based at a university campus in Pune. Sitting in the back of my Uber from the airport, I gazed onto Pune's evening streets, marvelling at how much space there was compared to Delhi. It seemed like juice stalls here had proper places to sit and chat, unlike the *mosambi [sweet lemon]* carts in Delhi where you stood up and downed your glass in one. My Hindi was very weak at this time, and the driver and I swapped a few 'are you marrieds?' – the standard conversation I used to learn Hindi with auto-rickshaw drivers in Delhi – before descending into a comfortable silence. This was until we left the main highway and began ascending an incredibly well-kept road to seemingly nowhere. We slithered down the other side of the ridge, the dry rocky scenery pressing up against the green fairways of a surprise golf club. Down below, a smattering of lights heralded the hidden away campus where I'd spend most of the coming five weeks – an oasis of curated green twinkling in the dusk of the brown-grey shrubland around it.

### **The Opening Days of the Centre: the group and the self**

In my first few days at the Centre I felt incredibly alone. Evaara was the Teach-Them alumna I was closest to, but she and the other alumni were wrapped up in reunions with old Teach-Them friends. These were the NGO staff who had arrived three days before the fellows to plan and prepare for the training. I was the only outsider, the only one who had no memories of the

Centre to draw on, and like many a neophyte, I waited with mild resentment as the Teach-Them community rewove bonds in which I was not yet initiated. Mercifully, my alienation did not go unnoticed. Pranav, a Delhi Teach-Them staff member, and close friend of Evaara, sat down with me by the campus's central fountain and explained a few things:

Teach-Them work culture percolates from the Centre, and a change of culture comes from the Centre. There are three pillars that fellows must engage with, (1) self-development – that is, leadership, (2) culture (group development) and (3) pedagogy.

Perhaps this was a cue for me to begin developing my own leadership and not expect too much immediate support from Evaara. But it was difficult to avoid her: the next day she was up on stage supporting a training where staff were reminded to teach fellows to 'own their own learning'. The comment was met with a cacophony of finger-snaps, and as I sat dumbfounded by this odd ritual, my neighbour whispered an explanation in my ear. Clapping as a form of appreciation can drown out the teacher, so, if you agree with something a teacher (or anyone else) has said, you can click your fingers. As I ingested this esoteric practice, I heard the next snippet of the training: staff must push fellows to 'develop a strong set of values and mindsets'. But which values and mindsets, I wondered to myself, were they meant to develop?

The next day, fellows began to arrive, but not before the staff team made ample preparation. As fellows stepped out of their taxis, staff members would stand close by and cheer. One wore a sign on his chest that read 'Free Hugs'. Fellows were also presented with a game: each was given a card with a word on it and was told they needed to find the person who had the card with the corresponding word. I played this introduction game too, but not knowing Hindi or Indian culture too well, I had to wait for the fellow who had 'Gulab' to shriek with delight when they discovered I had the word 'Jamun' (Gulab Jamun, of course, is a famous South Asian dessert). All these games and acts of welcome were just the start of what Pranav had described to me as 'culture' – these were acts designed to initiate fellows into a community committed to producing an atmosphere of mutual support, with specific practices like finger snapping that performatively produced a sense of alignment.

Later that evening, I got insight into what fellows were expected to sacrifice as the cost of joining this new movement of educationalists. As fruit bats swarmed the canopy in one of the campus's many flower gardens, I sat with Smriti – a senior member of the Teach-Them Delhi

staff – as she explained how the Centre is designed to draw fellows away from what they currently value and towards the mission of Teach-Them.

One of the first things we do here is take the fellows to visit the community<sup>30</sup> so they understand what is at stake for the children. We want them to feel the injustice, we want them to let go of their other desires and devote themselves to these kids. We want them to notice how hard it is to teach a class full of kids if you stay up partying the night before. The first three things to go when a fellow begins their teaching is their social life, their family, and their health.

The staff trainer's insistence on fellows 'owning their learning' seemed to fit well with this. Ownership was not about commitment to a new profession, but to a new way of life. Smriti wanted fellows to recognise that marginalised children's lack of education is objectively more important than their own middle-class concerns. But Teach-Them recognise that fellows must be slowly led to make this connection for themselves, and it must be something affective and emotional. Fellows must look inside themselves, must reflect on their own privilege, and come to realise that they are ethically obliged to commit to a cause beyond and above the happiness and prosperity of themselves and their own biological family. Part of the way Teach-Them succeed in motivating fellows to dedicate themselves to their educational mission is indeed to design a residential training retreat with the feel of a Goffmanian 'total institution'. Indeed, when I questioned Pranav on the theme of ownership, he made it clear, 'so much at the Centre is about ownership because we are a movement, not an organisation'. In my reading this means that fellows must discard their image of Teach-Them as an NGO who offers them a stipend to complete a two-year fellowship and replace it with the idea that they are now part of a lifelong social movement. This is the shift in 'mindset' which the trainer told staff to induce in fellows. Over the next few opening days of the Centre, I was exposed to other methods by which Teach-Them incite fellows to emotionally and ethically commit to the movement, and – in all honesty – I felt myself becoming committed too.

---

<sup>30</sup> 'Community' is a euphemism for 'slum', or low-income residential urban settlement. It is a term indigenous to the largely middle-class NGO educators of the Teach-Them network. Its (ambi)valence is disputed by members of Teach-Them both ways: in one sense it is seen to signify dignity for the people who live there, while 'slum' does not; in the another reading, the term is seen as a diminutive disguise, a paternalistic term that highlights how low-income settlements lack money but abound in what middle-class areas have a lost, i.e. a sense of community.

### **The messianic culture of Teach-Them**

Across the first introductory days of the Centre, the fellows were showered with motivational speeches from the organisation's highest order, including Shruti, Teach-Them's founder. Positivity and hope were the overtones, and the individual potential of each fellow was the focus. Enshrined in these speeches lay the contradiction which has continued to motivate my exploration of Teach-Them as a subjectifying discourse and event. I argue that Teach-Them expect fellows – and later, students – to follow a path of self-development which is always-already circumscribed by the values and worldview that Teach-Them prescribe. In this story, selfhood is a wonderous and magical event which can be explored as something extraneous to the social and political context in which a subject exists. The central element of Shruti's opening speech to the fellows was telling them a story she had written on the plane from New York to Mumbai, a few days before she arrived at the Centre. In the story, a girl is searching for her 'inner light', but is struggling to find it. She goes around meeting various characters trying to find out where her light is, before realising her own light (read: purpose/essence), has been inside her all along. After telling the story, Shruti led the auditorium, full of the 300 plus fellows as well as staff, in a group singalong to the gospel choir classic 'This Little Light of Mine'.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine

The message was clear: each of us – fellow and future student – has our own personal, esoteric purpose, a 'light' that we must locate by looking inside ourselves. But this quasi-religious imagery – the song has Christian origins after all – was placed neatly alongside metaphors drawn from the economics and engineering disciplines in which most of these fellows completed their university degrees.<sup>31</sup> Shining with the zeal of a cult mother, Shruti tells us that Teach-Them's mission is to 'fuel the system with leaders', and that fellows must 'change the deficit of belief into an abundance of belief'. Here, the 'problem' of education inequity is

---

<sup>31</sup> The structure of the secondary schooling system informs the university system in India: in Grade 11 and 12 students must choose from one of three streams: humanities, commerce, or science, where those with the lowest overall grades are expected to take humanities, those with middle grades commerce, and those with high grades science. Despite the rise of the cultural value of entrepreneurship, many of the fellows I spoke to told me their parents wanted them to become either doctors or engineers. Teach-Them fellows are 99% university graduates, and I only met a handful – usually those from wealthier families – who took humanities degrees. In my estimate, 90% of Teach-Them fellows have completed an undergraduate degree in commerce or hard science.



framed in mechanistic terms, as something which can be ‘worked on’ by a team of individuated non-relational selves who can stand outside the problem like they can stand away from an engine or computer.

Lilly Irani neatly summarises how the narrative of engineers as social innovators circulates in contemporary India. She paraphrases a government luminary who, in a televised panel regarding the value of Indian Centres of Technology (IITs), said ‘engineers have the capacity to innovate by going to people, identifying their problems, and “creating value” by solving them’ (Irani 2019:6). As we continue to see in this thesis, the logic of ‘solving’ problems of social inequality through education reform is central to the narrative of Teach-Them and its progeny.

The metaphor of a person working on something from which they can stand apart facilitates the fellows’ conceptualisation of themselves as actors with *power*. But there is a complex dual process of subjectification at play in Shruti’s speech. Fellows must accept that they are students at the Centre – not yet leaders – and they must rigorously prepare for their future as leader-teachers by submitting to the cultural practices of Teach-Them, which range from simple behavioural shifts – snapping not clapping – to working 15-hour days on five hours’ sleep. But, simultaneous to submitting to imposed work schedules and practices, these fellows are also guided by managers in self-reflection practices where they are meant to discover their inner ‘light’. The quality of this light, however, must not contrast with the mission and method of Teach-Them’s culture, and we see below what happens when it does. It is important to read the fact that fellows undergo this dual process of subjectification as a pedagogical event. Fellows must commit to the mission and culture of Teach-Them *and* self-reflection in part so that they can teach their students how to undergo the same process. That is, as fellows in school, they must teach children to be ‘leaders’, but only insofar as their leadership is directed towards Teach-Them’s vision of social change via education reform. The Teach-Them founder makes this point clear in her speech with a provocative call-to-arms:

Cohort of 2017, all your children are waiting for you to change their lives.

Here, fellows are the active subjects who confront the passive children who are ‘waiting’ for them to ‘change their lives’. But the sentence is also a metaphor for the relationship between the staff and the fellows during Centre: it is staff who need to work hard to change these fellows

who are yet to be inspired by the philosophy of self-reliant leadership and the devotion to ending education inequity above all else. The speech also informs another key question of my thesis: what happens to fellows who build a sense of self that is sustained by maintaining a role as leader? As I show in the coming chapters, the desire to become a ‘purposed-leader’ can have negative effects on educators’ mental health as well as on the success of their education projects.

This is the logic of leadership: you will be relevant and important just as long as you have those who follow you. But what happens when the fellowship ends and the fellow – now a Teach-Them alumni – loses access to children to lead? This question is at the heart of this thesis and one which I answer in part by exploring the value of purposed-leadership. First, let’s continue to look at how Teach-Them use the culture of the Centre – and the concept of leadership – to induce just enough self-belief in fellows to allow them to approach the daunting task of teaching a class full of kids with only five weeks of teacher training behind them.

### **Positivity as policy**

One method Teach-Them use to build fellows’ confidence is producing an atmosphere of unbridled positivity throughout the Centre. To close her speech, Shruti leads us all in another singalong. This time it’s Lee Anne Womack’s ‘I Hope You Dance’ – an emotional country ballad with the main refrain:

Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance,  
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance.

I hope you dance... I hope you dance...

Stood there amongst a group of young people, disorientated by the intensity of this new community, I let the words fill my lips and the tears roll down my face; I submit to the group consciousness and intersubjectivity of the moment.<sup>32</sup> And this was no accident. Generating one’s own positivity is a key feature taught and practised at the Centre. In the first All Staff

---

<sup>32</sup> I can’t help but compare my experience to Véronique Bénéï’s analysis of how singing is used in the subjectification of Indian school children, “singing and callisthenics ... are different from most ordinary teaching ... and bear emotional dimensions meaningful for a cultural construction of the self.” (Bénéï 2008:42)

Meeting, Zeenat, one of the staff training team at Teach-Them, reminds Teach-Them employees to ‘keep the big staff WhatsApp group for happy things’. The command to produce positivity is just one breath away from another instruction Zeenat has for the staff: they must induce fellows to recognise that doing the fellowship will enhance their leadership skills.<sup>33</sup> Zeenat operates with the assumption that fellows are more interested in learning leadership than how to be a good teacher, just as V. Subramanian (2018) argues. Zeenat’s insistence on only sharing positive thoughts shows the anxiety with which Teach-Them staff operate during Centre. The show must go on and fellows must be induced into the movement.

### **Culture eats leadership for breakfast?**

Recent anthropological literature shows how the cultural valuing of leadership and entrepreneurship has grown in postliberalisation India, (Gooptu 2013a; Sancho 2016; Irani 2019). I argue that Teach-Them help forge a specific version of leadership – purposed-leadership – which induces certain Teach-Them alumni to desire the role of social entrepreneur. At the Centre, fellows are told to adhere to five specific ‘values’ as they continue their journey in the education movement: reflection, integrity, sense of possibility, excellence, and love. Perhaps the reason ‘leadership’ is not listed is because Teach-Them take it for granted as a value. What I am interested in here, then, as an ethnographer, is *how* the valuing of leadership is taught to fellows and how it occurs through a concomitant narrative of self-as-the-locus-of-social-change.

Fellows are simultaneously expected to find their ‘little light’ – an inner dream that guides them – and accept the structural impositions of the Teach-Them training Centre. For example, they must accept the gruelling schedule without a hint of dissent. During the Centre, fellows wake at 6am for a 6.30am breakfast and must catch the bus to school at 7am. After an hours’ ride from campus to the city, fellows teach from 8am – 1pm in summer schools that Teach-Them have arranged for local children. When they arrive back at campus at 2pm, they have

---

<sup>33</sup> Every few days at the Centre, Zeenat’s team send digital questionnaires to fellows asking them for their feedback on their experience of Centre so far. Zeenat then shares this data with staff in meetings and tests staff on how attuned they are to what fellows are thinking. In the first survey of the Centre, Zeenat asked fellows whether they agree or disagree with the statement, ‘I believe I can develop my leadership through teaching’. When she reveals that only 75% of fellows clicked ‘Agree’, she reminds the staff that ‘we need to keep pushing this up’.

lunch, then attend instructional lectures – on pedagogy, lesson planning, child psychology etc – until around 8pm when they break for dinner. At 9pm, when they have some free time, they are expected to plan lessons for the next day in school.

At the 2017 Centre, there was one fellow, Kaushik, who questioned this regime. He told me:

I dropped everything and came to Teach-Them because the whole world works on speed and operational efficiency, people say, ‘Yes, we’d love to do that, but we have deadlines,’ – but now, here, at Teach-Them, I see the same thing.

Perhaps Kaushik’s inner ‘light’ is telling him that Teach-Them’s regime of discipline is not something he values. While listening to his inner desires, Kaushik skipped elements of the Centre schedule, and refused to plan lessons as per Teach-Them’s pedagogical framework. At the end of the Centre Kaushik was told he would not be allowed to continue the fellowship because he had not properly completed the training.

As Pranav had explained to me, fellows are expected to commit to both self-development through leadership, and group development by accepting the *culture* of Teach-Them. In another chat, Pranav told me his definition of ‘culture’: culture is ‘a constant and consistent behaviour exhibited from a group’. This is the tension which produces the double process of self-making during the Centre: a fellow must at once develop themselves as a unique leader by finding their light *and* submit to the culture of the organisation. Here, Kaushik seems to have followed his self-belief more than the culture of Teach-Them: he believed he didn’t need to attend all the lectures and could find his own way to teach kids. It seems then, that leadership isn’t valued as highly as obedience: as a fellow, Kaushik must listen and learn before he can be allowed to trust his own instincts and become a teacher-leader in his own way, regardless of where his ‘light’ leads him.

Kaushik was not alone in this friction, and other fellows also faced challenges when self-reflection exercises led them to explore a side of their personality that did not fit neatly into the messianic mission of Teach-Them. For example, one fellow explained how, in an exercise where she was tasked with imagining a future self, she depicted herself as an 80-year-old woman wearing a bikini. When the leader of the circle questioned the vanity that seemed present in the image, the fellow felt judged. The injustice of this judgement was sharpened,

said the fellow, when that same manager arrived in class the next day wearing very revealing clothing. The point here is twofold: Teach-Them encourage the production of ‘safe spaces’ where fellows can honestly reflect on their own desires, but, when these desires seem petty compared to the grand cause of ending education inequity, fellows are critiqued for their self-interestedness. As Smriti told me, the fellows are expected to let go of hedonistic desires such as ‘partying’. In my reading, when this manager saw the image of the bikini she felt that this was not the future a committed Teach-Them alumni should be imagining if she had dedicated her life to serving marginalised children. Importantly, the fellow seemed less upset by this act of moral policing than she did with the hypocrisy of it: why would the manager admonish the bikini drawing if she too wore whatever clothing she liked? Again, fellows are expected to practice self-reflection, but if this reflection does not meet the standards of Teach-Them’s hierarchy of value, (i.e. the children’s education delivered quickly and before all else) then it is denigrated as an unworthy, selfish desire that must be purged.

### **Teach-Them Centre: the production of ‘collectively oriented individualism’?**

Almost every Teach-Them fellow or alumni I have ever spoken to told me that their family was not happy about them joining the fellowship. Instead, their parents wanted them to secure a salaried job in a ‘corporate’, begin earning money to help the family prosper, and develop their social and financial status to help secure a suitable marriage. Indeed, one fellow told me how joining Teach-Them was effectively a way of escaping the purview of parents who had forbidden her from going on holidays without them. Nevertheless, for at least some fellows at the Centre, the five-week residential program is the longest they’ve stayed away from their family homes. Many undergraduates in India continue to live with their families during their studies, and a good portion of fellows in 2017 were recruited directly from university. Whatever excitement and independence fellows might feel being away from their family homes, Teach-Them take advantage of the fact that they might also be missing the sense of collective support and relationality which living in a family can provide.

One important initiation event for fellows at the Centre is to take part in an exercise called Life Maps. In this session, a facilitator uses arts-based reflection techniques to induce fellows to remember key emotional experiences of their past. Fellows must draw these experiences on

paper and then choose one to tell as a story to the group.<sup>34</sup> The facilitator, a Teach-Them veteran, goes first and sets the bar. The key is that the story reveals past failures and loss; it is meant to make the storyteller vulnerable to the group, and the group are expected to respond with empathy. The entire experience can take up to four hours, and, in all honesty, it was one of the most emotional group experiences in which I have ever taken part. By the end of the session, I felt a desire to care for the members of my group in a way that seemed incongruous with the 72 hours that I'd known them. The exercise helped me accept my role as participant (and not just observer) and the information I learnt in the session directed my behaviour towards my group members in the weeks to come. For example, one woman spoke of how she had failed the test to join the Indian Navy, not once, but eleven times. She eventually gave up on this dream and looked for other paths in life. In working alongside her in the following weeks, I felt a surge of empathy as she negotiated how to test children in class: I knew she had a history of failure with exams, and this helped me empathise with the stress she carried around testing children.

Life Maps is just one example of how life at the Centre is an exercise in community building as much as it is a direct attempt to train teachers; the spontaneous rain dance, which I displayed in my opening vignette, is another. But this collectivity is always structured with individualism. The Centre operates as an engine of the IERM, it generates a 'collectively oriented individualism [that] marrie[s] broader duties of progress to self-actualisation' (Irani 2019:78).<sup>35</sup> Life Maps seems to teach the individual that although their story is unique, it is not isolated: we all face failures and struggles, and by accepting these events, and by seeing ourselves as survivors of them, we learn that there is no difficulty that we cannot overcome. Experiences like Life Maps provide a shared emotional experience which works to keep the community of Teach-Them fellows connected during and after they finish their fellowship. This sense of community is threatened, however, by the sense of competition that creeps back in as individuals frame their ability to be 'purposed-leaders' in terms of acquiring roles with social status.

---

<sup>34</sup> Andrea Muehlebach recounts how a similar process of emotional self-production occurs in volunteer training programs in northern Italy. Muehlebach argues that private emotions must be externalised onto paper – through drawings and writing – because only then do they become legible and public. Furthermore, for Muehlebach, the emotions only become truly valuable when they appear in public, not as drawings, but as unwaged labour. (Muehlebach 2012:127)

<sup>35</sup> Irani also writes about the IERM, although not by this moniker.

2020 was a historic year for Teach-Them as it was the first time that a Teach-Them student graduated from school and joined the Teach-Them fellowship themselves. But this student was not alone. In the same year, another Teach-Them student also joined the fellowship, albeit a few months after the first. When she was asked how she felt about being the *second* Teach-Them student to join as a fellow and not the first, she replied, ‘It’s disappointing, but it’s okay, I’ll just have to be better than her!’ While the Teach-Them community snapped loudly for her sense of possibility and self-confidence, I was struck by how the moment epitomises the individualism produced by the organisation. A girl who had spent her entire secondary school career being taught by Teach-Them fellows, fellows taught at the Centre to guide her with Teach-Them values, sees herself in direct competition with another student who will soon be her co-fellow. The student has been taught to see herself as a change maker, a purposed-leader. It is she who must lead and not follow, and it is her own self-belief that must stay high if she is to succeed as an entrepreneurial originator of social change.

### **Self-belief as central resource**

My answer to why the Teach-Them student-cum-fellow provided her competitive answer is to do with how leadership is understood within Teach-Them. Her speech act (I’ll have to be better) is spoken to generate self-belief. It is self-belief that is the most essential product of the Teach-Them Centre, because it is self-belief, and self-belief only that ensures fellows get through the first six months of their teaching fellowship. The fellowship can be cruel. Evaara often tells the story of her first day at school: she opened the door to her classroom only to have it slammed back in her face as a student shouted, ‘We don’t want you here!’. But one of the reasons she, and a host of other fellows, persisted with their fellowship was because of what they had been taught at the Centre. Shruti’s rousing call (‘Cohort of 2017, all your children are waiting for you to change their lives’) was no one-off: fellows at the Centre are continually told that it is their grit and determination that are their most valuable assets. But the belief that grit and determination are one’s most valuable assets leads to frustration when educators fail *despite* the intensity of their determination. For example, in Chapter 3, we see how Baan becomes frustrated when he is not valued by his employees, despite the effort he makes in this regard.

Back at the Centre, it is not by accident that of Pranav's 'three pillars' of 'self-development, culture, and pedagogy', pedagogy came last. The Centre's focus is not to train teachers, it is to build a sense of community strong enough that fellows continue to feel part of it long after they have left and are isolated in poorly-resourced inner city schools.

Teach-Them's method of subjectification is very close to what Irani describes as the production of entrepreneurial citizenship in contemporary India. As she notes, 'more than a set of methods, principles, or epistemologies, what entrepreneurial citizens share is an ethos of collaboration, experimental life, empathic civic interest, and the monitoring of possibility' (Irani 2019:13). The fertilisation of this entrepreneurial mindset is what fortifies fellows to step into the classroom as pedagogically underprepared teachers. The 'empathic civic interest' which has been stoked up in fellows by speeches from Shruti and her team is given wings by the counterpart message: you are a cohort who can rely on each other for collaboration and who must 'monitor' each others' 'sense of possibility' to ensure no-one loses faith. In the ethnographic chapters to follow, we see how this 'sense of possibility' is reduced to individualistic 'ambition' as the valuing of purposed-leadership takes centre stage in educators' lifeworlds.

Teach-Them are compelled to inculcate their fellows with an intractable sense of purpose during the Centre because they know that, in terms of pedagogical and emotional training, the fellows are woefully underprepared to step into government and low-fee private schools in the city and teach a class of children. Five weeks is not long enough to train adequate teachers, but it is long enough to radicalise a group of young people to enhance their sense of self-belief. Teach-Them must centralise the self as the locus of social change because it is basically the only resource fellows can rely on. But what psychological side products are created in this process?

I argue that Teach-Them set their fellows up with a hunger for self-actualisation through leadership, a hunger that can be satisfied easily enough during the two-year fellowship where a fellow has continuous access to a classroom of impressionable children, but is harder to fulfil once the fellowship ends. Fellows are told that children are waiting for them to change their lives, and indeed, most fellows do change the lives of the children they teach, if only a little, and if only, perhaps, temporarily. During this time, they do not need to question their purpose because they have committed and submitted to the movement of Teach-Them – and have been



given a classroom of children to inspire. But what does a fellow do when the two-year fellowship ends? How do they continue to gain the sense of empowerment they received from leading children in school?

This thesis is about exploring the subjectivities of Teach-Them alumni social entrepreneurs, those who found their ‘light’ to such a degree, it seems, that they have devoted themselves to launching and running a start-up style NGO. It explores how Teach-Them’s theory of self as locus of social change informs the practice of individuals who enact leadership by running their own education organisations.

### **The self as the locus of social change**

What is the theory of the self as the locus of social change? In this theory of the human condition, a subject is that which can see the world as a set of problems outside themselves, problems that they can work on like an engineer trying to improve an inefficient machine. Here, the self is premised as a kind of ‘first mover’ that sits outside time and space. For Lilly Irani, organisations like Teach-Them pedal ‘narratives that valorise initiative over labour’ and ‘in doing so, they construct an origin point for progress, eliding the labour and power relations that produce it’ (2019:80). Collective labour is not as important to Teach-Them as the dream of being a ‘first mover’, of discovering ones’ self to be an ‘origin point for progress’.

One of Teach-Them’s five values promoted at the Centre is ‘sense of possibility’, a ‘mindset’ which helps fellows to develop a conception of their self as an object of limitless potential. ‘They’, that is, their conscious mind, must ‘look inside’ themselves and find ‘their light’: they must find whatever it is that most absorbs them and look forward to where that light leads. Again, it is illuminating to compare Teach-Them’s process with volunteer training programs in Italy, as Muehlebach writes:

The necessary prerequisite for proper ethical action consisted of students first recognising the suffering of others and then listening to their *innermost selves*, coded as spontaneous and as already internally available in the form of anger, compassion, or pity.’ (2012:120, my emphasis).

It is one's emotional *innermost self* that must be located, but once located, it cannot be left untamed. For Muehlebach's volunteers, their 'psychological meanderings were to be streamlined into a definitively structured, specifically cultured normative moral order, [and their] innermost desires ... qualified and regimented by [the volunteer trainer]' (2012:126). Similarly, the 'innermost desires' of Teach-Them fellows must allow their 'little light' to be directed to serve the mission of Teach-Them.

For Teach-Them, the real mission is not to end education inequity directly, but to induce fellows to devote themselves to Teach-Them's vision so that there are more educational foot soldiers for the movement. This subject making is always a process of externalisation. At first, the children are the victims, and the fellows are the saviours – but once fellows induce the value of leadership in children, the children are equipped to be their own saviours.

Fellows are also expected to submit to an act of double consciousness: they must accept that Teach-Them is not an 'organisation' but a 'movement'.<sup>36</sup> They must ignore the organisational hierarchies at play and imagine that each member of the Teach-Them community acts only on the direction of a self-aware personhood who has rationally chosen to devote their life energy to the cause. As we saw with Kaushik, if a fellow questions the operational preferences of Teach-Them – and makes their question known via active dissent – they are marked out as unsuitable teachers and asked to leave the program.

Those best suited to the Teach-Them approach to social change are not oblivious to the complexity of social inequality, but instead frame their work as the 'path' they have chosen. For example, one of the most successful Teach-Them alumni social entrepreneurs in Delhi, Himali, who we meet below, explains that changing the self is the best method by which challenges of structural inequality can be met. She frames the problem within the logic of scale: it is easier for her to access her own life, to change her own practices, than it is to seek political reform through activism or policy. Her story exemplifies what makes Teach-Them's method so powerful: if at any point an individual feels overwhelmed by the magnitude of the 'problem' – be that corruption in government education departments, demotivated teachers, malnourished children – they can reframe the difficulty as one originating in the individuated self. When the

---

<sup>36</sup> For a view into how different 'movements' in India subjectify members and distinguish themselves from 'organisations', see Christophe Jaffrelot's work on Hindu nationalism (e.g. 2021), and the work of Alpa Shah on Indian Maoists (2018).

world is framed as ‘problem’, the self is a panacea: if only each person is trained to change themselves, there will be no more problems.

The self is a mythical Archimedean point: we use the location of the self as a pivot point from which we can change the world even though the self is already ontologically constituted by and with the world. This idea of the self as the locus of social change is the *technology of self* which comes into being during the Teach-Them training Centre. Here is my description of this technology of self.

First, an individual is taught that there is a true self deep within them. This self knows what its purpose is on earth. If a person practises self-reflection – if they listen carefully to the desires of this true self – then they will come to know their purpose. Once a person knows their true self they will feel compelled to try to manifest this inner self in outer reality – they will achieve emotional satisfaction only when their inner self is actualised in the visible world. A person who knows their purpose strives to ensure all their actions match the desires and values of their inner self. Their self-reflection has illuminated the desires of their true self, and by ensuring their worldly activity is aligned with this desire, their true self will become manifest in the world. The process of aligning inner purpose with outer action is called self-actualisation. And it is through self-actualisation en masse that social change occurs.

This technology of self relates to Foucault’s exploration of the hermeneutics of the self, which ‘implies that there is something hidden in ourselves and that we are always in a self-illusion that hides the secret’ (Foucault 2000:247). I suggest that Teach-Them draw fellows to a focus on self that simultaneously promises fellows access to their ‘inner light’ and recognises that any technology of self is also always relationally connected to the community and culture through which the self must be imagined. It is at this point that I think Teach-Them’s conception of self can only be described in the language of the spiritual. To my mind, this self seems connected to the Christian-and Roman influenced ‘hermeneutics of self’ (Foucault 2000), Hindu notions of *dharma*<sup>37</sup>, and Buddhist the self/non-self as it is presumed in Buddhist vipassana meditation. Whatever its origins or connections, it is indeed the promise of seemingly otherworldly power that makes such a conception of selfhood so powerful, and which ties this

---

<sup>37</sup> See Easwaran (2019:31–36) for a simple introduction to the concept

sense of self to the value which Teach-Them seem to hold unquestioned throughout all their work: the value of being a purposed-leader.

The valuing of purposed-leadership that circulates in Teach-Them is what inspires fellows to commit to education reform. But the contours of this education reform are circumscribed by the neoliberal development logic which overcodes contemporary global education discourse (Ball 2012; Lingard and Rizvi 2010). On the global scale, the types of selves which are valued are predetermined by a theory in which individual human subjects must learn self-regulation and self-reliance so as to offer flexible and appropriate labour to a fast-changing global market.<sup>38</sup> And the Teach-Them Centre does its part in this mission. As we will see in the below ethnography, self-management and self-discipline become key concerns of Teach-Them educators who value purposed-leadership. Simultaneously, purposed-leadership, becomes a method through which middle-class educators gain ‘entrepreneurial citizenship’ – because like Teach-Them, entrepreneurial citizens ‘valorise[] individual enthusiasm, energy, will and leadership as the source of social progress’ (Irani 2019:78).

\*

It is now the final few days of Teach-Them Centre in 2017. I sit amongst a room of tittering fellows, eager to learn which school they will be placed in for the next two years of their lives. Names are called, envelopes distributed with a handshake, and nervous fingers Google the location of the school written on the card. In the swarm of excitement someone forgets who I am, ‘Rich, where is your envelope?’, they enquire. I say something witty to hide my pain and think about emailing the University of Sussex to tell them I’m not coming for my PhD. It was a moment of *affective intensity*, one in which the different things I consciously value came into conflict with an emotional need to stay part of the Teach-Them community. Like the fellows, I was exhausted from five weeks of collective life at the Centre, but unlike the fellows I didn’t have a set of children ‘waiting for me to change their lives’. I felt defeated, and in some way cheated, for I now had no route through which I too could practice purposed-leadership.

---

<sup>38</sup> See the Divya section of Chapter 2 for an ethnographic analysis of self-regulation and self-management as key to purposed-leadership.

## A glimpse of life after Teach-Them

Before I continue with the three ethnographic chapters that display Teach-Them alumni practising purposed-leadership, I will provide two examples of how fellows carry the narrative of self-as-locus-of-social-change out of Teach-Them and into the work they do beyond it. The first vignette foreshadows the thesis's focus on an education start-up NGO called Clear-Space and brings us right to the heart of their work in Delhi's government schools. The second provides a snapshot of a social entrepreneur who epitomises how the theory of self-as-locus-of-social-change is so tempting in a world of such complex social injustice. I select these two vignettes to add weight to my theoretical speculations on selfhood, to show, ethnographically, that the theory of the human subject as originator of change pervades the lives of young educationalists who have passed through the Teach-Them fellowship.

### **Vignette A: The difference between Teach-Them and government-trained teachers**

It is quiet in the near-empty classroom where I sit with Binu and Gita, two Teach-Them alumni who now work for the start-up Clear-Space. The children have gone home. The teachers have gone home. We sit on mats on the floor surrounded by pens and notebooks. Our eyes have been closed for some time as we reflect on the school day that has just passed: the parent who stole flowers from the garden in the morning, the corridor shouting match over which teacher mis-scheduled the exam timetable; the lingering face of a white intruder, some kind of researcher who works with the NGO. We open our eyes and begin to share about our day at work; I shuffle back and begin to write notes. Gita – the School Leader – begins to guide her subordinate, Binu, through a psychological analysis of the teachers who their managers at Clear-Space have sent them to support. After a few minutes, Binu's frustration bubbles over ...

Binu: All SDMC<sup>39</sup> NGOs struggle with teachers. Why do none of the teachers want to learn from us? How can they be so unaware how much power they have to change the country?!

---

<sup>39</sup> South Delhi Municipal Corporation, the government department who oversee the management of all government-funded primary schools in the south region of the city.

Binu then opens his phone and shows a photo of the kids he taught in Hyderabad during his Teach-Them fellowship. He tells us how well they are doing, and how the new Teach-Them fellow is still implementing his teaching ideas. He continues:

The teachers are slowing us down. We could get so much done in three months.

\*

The above snapshot displays the key frustration of Teach-Them alumni who seek to work with government schoolteachers after they have finished their teaching fellowships: teachers are harder to train than children. At the time of the above exchange, Binu was only three months out of his fellowship. As a fellow, Binu was not tasked with developing the passion and pedagogy of the government-employed teachers who he worked alongside in his Hyderabad school; his mission was to lead children. Inspiring children to believe they can change the world through sheer determination and self-belief was not too difficult for Binu, as we see, he's proud of what he achieved with kids, and uses their photos and stories as a boost of morale while he shares his despair at the teachers' mindsets in this Delhi government primary school. The teachers have not trained with Teach-Them, they have not been taught that they as individuals have the power to end education inequity. Instead, they have spent decades in a bureaucratic, hierarchical system which expects obedience, consistency, and conformity. More importantly, the teachers in question are married women with a host of domestic responsibilities and social obligations. Smriti's expectation, shared at the Centre, that fellows deprioritise family during their fellowship, is not too difficult an ask, because most fellows are unmarried and have no children.

My thesis does not ethnographically explore the lives of government-employed teachers in the schools in which my research subjects work. I offer the scant few lines above to hint at how difficult it is for Teach-Them alumni to carry their theory of self-as-locus-of-social-change into education development work which seeks to develop the potential of established government teachers – the main focus of the NGO Clear-Space.

Still in his first few months post fellowship, Binu hopefully imagines teachers are free to act like fellows during the fellowship; he wants them to work 12-hour days, and, like Smriti

commands, put their own joy, family, and health behind the needs of the children. Binu believes that the teachers *genuinely* have the power to change the country if they decide to commit to Teach-Them's mission, he does not recognise the sociological conditions which structure the lives of his would-be colleagues. Part of the reason for this is that Teach-Them do not foreground the sociological conditions of the children who Teach-Them fellows must lead, only that these children are 'underprivileged' and need a fellow to help them 'find their light'.

But what is instrumental to a fellow's belief that they can change the world is devastating for the Teach-Them alumni who seek other educational change. Children have the privilege of youth and childhood; they can be allowed to experiment with dreams. Teachers are adults embedded in a socio-professional realm of government jobs and patriarchal joint families. Not only do these teachers have other moral and practical concerns, their life experience has taught them what Binu's experience at Teach-Them has not: that finding an inner self with an 'authentic' purpose and endless potential for determination is a fantasy used to motivate young people to populate a movement. I am not arguing that humans cannot do valuable or 'good' work while operating with the belief that the self is the locus of social change, I argue that holding such a belief will restrict them from understanding the complexities of their would-be colleagues or – in this case – as Binu would have, the teachers as his would-be tutees.

### **Vignette B: 'What are your values, bhaiya?'**

Values are a central theme of this thesis because the Teach-Them community never stops talking about them. As an ethnographic introduction to this theme, I offer the story of my first ever experience of setting foot in a Teach-Them classroom. The fellow who invited me to her class – Himani – was a friend of Evaara's, and she has now become one of the most famous Teach-Them alumni social entrepreneurs in India. At the time, in April 2016, Himani was developing her social-enterprise-to-be with her fellowship class of Grade 7 schoolgirls. When I asked if I could come visit her classroom to learn more about Teach-Them, she said no ... not unless I was prepared to offer a workshop to the kids in return. I was a bit flustered: I wasn't a trained teacher and hadn't yet been to the Teach-Them Centre to see how you learn the basics of teaching in five weeks! But Himani is an inspirational and persuasive woman, she knew I'd worked as a playwright and theatre maker, and told me to come and offer some of these skills to the students. I am still grateful to Himani for the challenge she set. I went home and spent

days designing a storytelling workshop based on a game I had learnt while visiting the Burning Man festival in Nevada.<sup>40</sup> Since then, I have gone on to offer versions of the workshop to children in other classrooms in India, to my peers at the University of Sussex, and even to a host of academics at an interdisciplinary conference in London. Himani used the same technique on me as had been used on her at the Centre: she put her faith in me and expected me to rise to the challenge. And her faith inspired in me the diligence needed to design a workshop that I was proud of. I include this personal story here because I am aware that the narrative I am building about Teach-Them comes across as distinctly critical, and as much as I want to highlight the political problems of positing social change as originating from the individual, I do believe this world view can inspire admirable actions.

Himani asked me to come to school late morning, just before the kids went on their 10.30am lunch break. This was to give me a chance to hang out with her class of girls in the playground before I hosted their workshop. I knocked on the door to her classroom as the girls were already lining up to leave for break; Himani waved me along to join them. As we reached the earthen play area, I suddenly became surrounded by the entire class, a host of 40 girls, all around 12-13 years old. At first, I couldn't catch their questions amongst the cacophony, until I realised they were all asking me variations of the same thing: 'Bhaiya, Bhaiya, what are your values?' I understood the first part of the sentence in the new language more than the part delivered in my mother tongue. 'Bhaiya' meant 'older brother', and was the moniker used for all male Teach-Them fellows in all Teach-Them classrooms.<sup>41</sup> But what did these girls mean by the term 'values'? I was genuinely stumped by this question, and it was not just the disorientation I felt about being asked such a personal question by a group of students who I had barely met. Nor was it the fact that their fluency in English didn't seem strong enough to think through abstract concepts like 'empathy', 'grit', 'compassion', which were the values they were telling me they had. No, it was the fact that no one in my life had ever asked me that question before – and I had never reflected on myself as person who 'had' values. This is not to say I had never

---

<sup>40</sup> If one ideal trajectory is that Teach-Them alumni return from Harvard with an MA in Education Policy, kudos, and first-world 'knowledge', then I, mobilising my own privilege, dragged communication games to India I garnered from visiting the Burning Man festival, the West's apogee of experiential liberalism.

<sup>41</sup> *Bhaiya* is a kinship term used across a wide set of social interactions in Delhi. Women in their late twenties will call an autorickshaw driver *bhaiya* even if he is clearly younger than them. It is a term of respect but also a class marker. Anyone who looks wealthy enough to hire a taxi would never be called *bhaiya* by a stranger, they would be called 'sir'. In most Delhi schools, male teachers are called 'sir' and female teachers 'maam'. It is a conscious cultural choice of Teach-Them to ask students to call fellows *bhaiya* or *didī* (older sister); it helps break down the professional authority aspect of the teacher-student relationship and emphasise the valence of family ties.



reflected on myself as an ethical being. Quite the contrary, I spent a large part of my formative years reading existentialist novels that seemed to confirm my belief that most ‘values’ and morals in society are contextual events wedded to the specific social, economic and religious history of the culture in which one lived. But to answer what values were ‘mine’ was a problem that confused the shit out of me!

‘What are your values, *bhaiya*?’ they continued to ask, as I continued to stand dumbfounded. Then one girl asked me a more manageable question, ‘Do you have brothers and sisters, *bhaiya*?’ To this I began telling them about my family, a tactic that lasted until breaktime ended and I could take up the authority of a teacher and deliver my workshop, free to dwell on what my values really might be ...

\*

Three years later I went to meet Himani at her home-cum-office in a block of flats in south Delhi. I was now in the middle of my PhD fieldwork and I wanted to interview her regarding her experience as a social entrepreneur of one of the fastest growing education start-ups in the city. We sit on her bed and I leaf through the books on her bedstand. She talks me through the different entrepreneur incubators she’s been a part of and how she doesn’t like how they breed competition. She speaks of growing up in a family who followed the teachings of J. Krishnamurthy, how her family practice Buddhist *vipassana* meditation, and how she was taught that if she can work on herself – as a self – the rest of the world will also work out. Knowing Himani has a philosophical temperament, I decide to push her and ask what she thinks about historical and structural critiques of society, such as Marxism. She replies:

I do have a strong feeling of social justice, but I think of people as individual notions of change. If we change ourselves, we’ll change the world. People first, structure second. I joined the [Teach-Them] fellowship after reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but I found it easier to start with self.<sup>42</sup>

It is clear then that it was not Teach-Them who induced Himani to see the self as the locus of social change – it was her own family – but it was Teach-Them who compounded this view and gave her the opportunity to teach this belief to a whole set of teenage girls. Himani is proud of the work she does and is very successful in gaining places on competitive incubators, as well

---

<sup>42</sup> Paulo Freire’s work – both literary and activist – was deeply influenced by Marxist conceptions of social revolution.

as winning funding for her organisation – despite her apparent distaste for competition. Himani sees the ‘person first, structure second’, and this is the worldview which I argue overcodes the approach of the majority of Teach-Them alumni social enterprises in Delhi. But, as we saw above in the case of Binu, it is much easier to change the ‘person’ when that person is a child, when they are both open to the possibilities of life yet un-lived, and not yet embedded in the responsibilities that make such ambitions seem like fantasy.

One of the central observations of this thesis is that, like Binu, many Teach-Them alumni struggle to find a way to continue Teach-Them’s mission once they have left the confines of the fellowship. Part of the reason, I argue, is that they lose access to children who make them feel like social change is happening before their very eyes. For example, Himani runs an NGO that supports children to work in the visual and performing arts. At one poetry event I attended a teenager from Himani’s NGO performed a poem about LGBTQ+ rights. Most in the audience were awed by the fact a young man from a low-income community could have such ‘progressive’ views, and seemed impressed that he could say such things about sexuality and gender considering the supposedly ‘conservative’ nature of his family and local community. One woman wryly wondered how the boy had come to choose the topic, thinking it was more to do with the NGO tutors than himself. I am not here to discuss the integrity of the poem this teenager wrote, nor to interrogate to what extent he ‘believed’ in what he was saying. My point is that his poetry reading gave the middle-class audience a chance to imagine that social change was happening as a direct result of Teach-Them alumni running educational projects for ‘underprivileged’ kids. This is similar to the experience that Binu had when he taught his students during his Hyderabad fellowship: he didn’t just feel that he was having an impact on the children he taught, but that his work was leading India to social justice through inculcating children to believe in themselves as individuals who are the originators of social change.

After experiencing the thrill of teaching on the Teach-Them fellowship, both Binu and Himani have gained meaning from working directly with children, and by teaching them to see their own selves as the engines of both personal and social development. But while Himani’s role as social entrepreneur provides her opportunity to continue the relationships with children she built during her fellowship, Binu is cut off from children in two ways. First, his move from Hyderabad to Delhi (to take a job at Clear-Space) means he can’t easily return to school and visit his students, and second, the NGO he works with – Clear-Space – have decided they will have more impact on children’s lives if they support government teacher development rather

than teach kids directly. In short, Himani has a method by which she can practice purposed-leadership, and Binu does not. Himani has launched an NGO start-up that allows her to magnify her own ‘little light’ – a love of performance poetry – by teaching this skill and practice to children; Binu is working for someone’s else NGO and so is not in the process of turning his ‘little light’ into a sustainable method for practising purposed-leadership. Binu’s failure to practice purposed-leadership causes him frustration, as we see above, and this frustration is multiplied because he has been promised by Teach-Them that dedication to the Indian Education Reform Movement will result in his own self-actualisation and fulfilment. Let me now take space to flesh out the concept of ‘purposed-leadership’ a little further.

## **Purposed-Leadership and Neoliberal Subjectivity**

### **The value of purposed-leadership**

My argument is this: fellows are sold a dream at the Centre that lasts the length of their fellowship, and no longer. They are told that if they drop all their other life concerns (partying, family, health) they will be rewarded tenfold by watching social change develop before their very eyes. For fellows who throw themselves into their teaching, the dream often comes true: their pupils do change, and it seems to be a direct result of their efforts. Another way to put this is that fellows are offered the chance of self-actualisation at the cost of offering themselves to the movement of Teach-Them. Teach-Them use Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in their Centre training. Self-actualisation sits at the top of the pyramid, and, paired with the focus on leadership, the Centre teaches fellows that part of being a leader is to emulate success.

The fellowship is an idealised setting in which to enjoy the fruits of leadership: it provides fellows with a group of children who are ‘waiting for them to change their lives’. At this point, successful fellows feel they are on a path to self-actualisation – but the situation is temporary. What happens next is the content of my thesis: I explore Teach-Them alumni who have become

attached to the sense of self they gained via their role as fellows and who are looking for ways to maintain that sense of self.

I argue that the core identity position of the Teach-Them sense of self is *purposed-leadership*, a term I have invented to describe the central guiding value of Teach-Them alumni. I track the inception of purposed-leadership to the subjectification processes of the Centre.

In order to explore this new concept, let me first explain what I mean by the separate terms ‘purpose’ and ‘leadership’. In a nutshell: a leader can lead without having a conscious purpose. For example, there is a famous YouTube video used to display the nature of leadership. In the video, a large group of people are sitting on a hill watching a music concert. Soon, a solo man stands and begins to dance wildly. About 30 seconds pass before someone joins him, and then suddenly everyone on the hill is up on their feet dancing. The man does not plan his route to leadership, he is simply in tune with his environment (the music, the field) and in tune with his own desire (he wants to dance). He takes a risk, he is spontaneous, and becomes a leader the minute that others also decide to get up and dance. He displays self-confidence, and his confidence inspires confidence in others.

Equally, a purpose-driven person can have a purpose without being a leader: a mother who devotes herself to their children’s well-being has purpose, but they are unlikely to be viewed as a leader. The mother works hard every day to earn money for the family, she attends to the house, and performs emotional labour for those around her. She uses the same methods of care as the other mothers in her community; she rises each day and continues her unspectacular work. Yes, she is inspiring, purpose can be as inspiring as leadership, but she can remain committed to her purpose without ever acquiring followers. Purpose can often go unnoticed, but leadership is dependent on attracting the attention of others. Purpose involves longer-term goals than leadership. Leadership is intuitive, purpose is conscious.

Purposed-leadership is an assemblage of purpose and leadership; when purpose and leadership meet in ‘purposed-leadership’, a new value is born. Each arm of the dyad informs and influences the other: leadership without purpose is something totally different, just so for purpose without leadership. Teach-Them must ensure fellows come to value purposed-leadership as a whole. Fellows arrive at the Centre wanting to become leaders, and Teach-Them provide a technology of self that helps fellow grow in the self-confidence needed for

leadership. If Teach-Them were to use the man dancing on the hill as an example of leadership, they would also explain how he became a leader: he developed self-confidence through self-reflection, he came to know himself and the world, he came to trust his intuition, so that when he felt it was time to dance, he manifested dancing, and his energy and awareness was felt by the crowd around him. People do not follow leaders who haven't tapped into a latent social energy. Teach-Them wants fellows to tap into the social energy of the Indian Education Reform Movement and realise that their potential as leaders should be fuelled by the purpose of ending education inequity.

With a handful of exceptions, Teach-Them fellows come from middle-class families. The simple fact that the entire training Centre is conducted in English makes clear this point, because to speak English fluently in India is itself a middle-class marker. As I explored in the Introduction chapter, the middle class rely on the discourse of meritocracy to legitimise their own prosperity. Teach-Them play on fellows' latent valuing of meritocracy to help inculcate the idea that self-discipline and grit are the most determining factors in a fellow's journey to self-actualisation and success. Within the same logic, Teach-Them assume that children who the fellows teach come from lower-income families who do not value meritocracy, and who have not achieved the 'enlightened consciousness of castelessness' which qualifies them as modern subjects (A. Subramanian 2019:18).

It is central to Teach-Them's conception of providing quality education to these children that fellows teach them how to desire leadership, because it is through cultivating the self-discipline and self-belief to become leaders that children will indeed become 'modern' middle-class subjects. Children must be taught that if they become leaders, if they see themselves as the *ex nihilo* origins of agency and power, then the world will change with them. This educational philosophy is epitomised by the words of Himani above, 'If we change ourselves, we'll change the world'. Teaching leadership becomes part of the purpose of Teach-Them, part of the way Teach-Them will achieve their purpose of ending education inequity.

How, then, do fellows find roles in which they can both practice and teach purposed-leadership after their fellowship ends? The remainder of this thesis explores how Teach-First alumni and affiliates seek to practice purposed-leadership through engagement with social enterprise – either by founding an NGO, or by taking on a leadership position within one. But before we

meet these educators, let me introduce how the subjectification processes of the Teach-Them Centre compound the tension of neoliberal subjectivity in which they live.

### **Teach-Them's fantasy of self-actualisation and the tension of neoliberal subjectivity**

The Delhi-based NGOs of the Indian Education Reform Movement which I studied during my fieldwork are the home to a specific technology of self. This technology of self is one that promotes self-reflection as route to self-knowledge and therefore self-actualisation. It is a technology promoted at the Teach-Them training centre, practised by NGO founders and leaders, taught to junior members of NGOs, and embedded in the education initiatives NGOs deliver to partner schools. By introducing the Teach-Them Centre and its subjectification practices in this chapter, I begin my ethnographic process of highlighting the links between this technology of self, the individualist meritocratic politics of India's middle class, and the rise of the social entrepreneur of education as a social role and cultural trope.

This technology of self carries with it a seemingly revolutionary notion of social change: if each person is devoted to their own self-actualisation then the need to address social inequality disappears. Although material inequality may remain, it will not matter, because each person will know their true self so clearly that the drive to actualise this self – to meet their purpose – will be strong enough to dismiss whatever adversity they meet. This story – that each individual in India will discover a self which is coterminous with their purpose – is what I call the fantasy of self-actualisation.

This fantasy of self-actualisation is a 'fantasy' in two ways. First, it is a fantasy because it is something desirable which is unlikely to be achieved. The educational philosophy of the IERM offers no critique of how global capitalism continues to exacerbate social and economic inequality – it instead operates, in the language of certain critical anthropologists of development, with an 'anti-politics' (Ferguson 1990; Fisher 1997).

The idea that self-reflection will produce self-actualisation is a fantasy in another way. I argue that Teach-Them discursively monitor and restrict the possibility of 'listening' to one's inner self and 'discovering' an authentic purpose. Teach-Them always place the reproduction of the

IERM above whatever ‘little light’ an individual might discover through self-reflection; the self-actualisation they promise is always subjugated to the prosperity of the education reform movement itself. When a new recruit’s self-reflection leads them to question the methods of Teach-Them, then the organisation eliminates this threat from the Movement – as we saw in the story of Kaushik above. But what happens when Teach-Them alumni who have accepted the methods of Teach-Them during their fellowship leave the organisation and continue their self-reflection? As we see in the ethnography to follow, entrepreneurial educators in from the movement suffer anxiety and low self-esteem. One reason for this, I argue, is that even if educators can locate an inner purpose that they can manifest to self-actualise, the Teach-Them community will not allow it unless the actions they take to manifest that purpose directly contribute to the IERM’s theory of social change and neoliberal methods of education reform.

There is another reason why educators experience anxiety as they desire to become purposed-leaders, one that best comes to light through the analytic lens of relational ontology. The IERM subject wants to be both authentic and autonomous: authentic to their ‘true’ selves, and autonomous so that they can do whatever it takes to actualise this self in the world. But if we begin our ontology with relations, not entities, we see how much tension is caused when a subject desires to do both. To be authentic in a relational world, one must accept the contingency and flexibility of one’s ‘essence’ or self. For the subjects who take short personality development courses in Sanjay Srivastava’s (in press) study on ‘relational flexibility’ in neoliberal India, this contingency isn’t problem – they can inhabit a neoliberal subjectivity while at work and put aside this role on returning home. In this way, Srivastava’s subjects can be authentic, because they are flexible in their conception of self, i.e. they accept a change in self based on the relations that are immediately present.

The educators in my study do not have this option. Instead, Teach-Them asks recruits to transform themselves through self-reflection; to become the realised representations of their true inner self. But in relational ontology there is no fixed inner self; instead, the self is made up of ‘intra-active becomings’ (Barad 2007). This leaves educators tasked with the impossible. They must be authentic to an ‘autonomous’ inner self which does not exist and authentic to a self which may exist, but which is materially and constitutionally changing as per its environment. Let me be clear: it is because I have witnessed and documented the subjective tension (anxiety and low self-esteem) experienced by educators in Delhi’s education NGOs that I seek theoretical frames to make sense of their experience. By seeing subjects as

ontologically relational, we have a base for understanding how difficult it is for them to attempt to maintain a coherent, consistent self across different professional and social environments.

I argue that the Movement use the promise of self-actualisation as a reward for devotion to the cause of education reform, and that the psychologised concept of an autonomous, knowable self becomes a tool that helps middle-class recruits to the movement make sense of their life choices. By convincing themselves that their true self can be known, and by believing that they know it, these educators produce a bedrock from which to imagine a stable life in the precarious employment of NGO-based education intervention. But a belief in this stable self becomes the premise for cruel optimism: the more they try to manifest this ‘core’ self, the more they distance themselves from authenticity. The thesis is an ethnographic exploration of what it is like to inhabit the affective tension of this ‘neoliberal’ subjectivity, neoliberal because it is one formed at the forefront a global education discourse overcoded with a neoliberal imaginary.

What are the daily practices of entrepreneurial educators desiring purposed-leadership? What are the contours of this struggle of imagining oneself both autonomous and authentic while playing the role of social entrepreneur? Is social entrepreneurship a method by which the middle-class can find a contemporary method for promoting their founding value of meritocracy? And can the promotion of self-actualisation through self-discipline, self-reflection, and the cultivation of self-belief produce anything more hopeful than cruel optimism?

### **Teach-Them: a postscript**

Before we take a closer look at the four entrepreneurial educators at the heart of my ethnography, let me offer one closing thought on the education NGO Teach-Them. While reading an earlier draft of my thesis in order to give feedback, my brother couldn’t help but comment:

Wow, the system designed by Teach-Them might manipulate middle-class kids into changing their values, but in this sense, it sounds like a really effective tool for social change!



Indeed, the reason I chose to focus so closely on Teach-Them in this opening chapter is because I have a close relationship with the organisation and I sympathise with their attempts to radicalise middle-class graduates into questioning their values. And as I've argued in this chapter, the radicalisation of fellows does achieve its primary aim: most fellows complete their placements in school and finish the fellowship. What I find important to track, from an anthropological perspective, is the longer-term effects of this subjectification on both the fellows who go through the process and the children their start-ups aim to serve. The vision of inspiring every person to become a leader in some way – a leader like the dancer on the hill – is for me a hopeful vision. But when the spirit of this leadership is strait-jacketed by a theory of humanity and social change that ignores sociological questions of power – and instead places focus on the meritocratic ideal of the individual – I feel motivated to analyse the cultural processes by which this takes place. The Teach-Them training Centre is one site of this cultural (re)production, and I hope my analysis can be of some use to those working to improve education equity in India in the years to come.

## *Chapter 2.*

# *Leadership, Individualism, Family: Stories of Arushi and Divya*

\*

## **Introduction to Chapter 2**

### **Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter juxtaposes two Teach-Them alumni as they negotiate their desire for purposed-leadership while working at Clear-Space, a Delhi-based start-up education NGO. In the opening half of the chapter, we meet Arushi, the ‘School Leader’ of the Dilip Vihar primary school where I volunteered as a teacher. First, we see Arushi performatively reproducing her role as ‘leader’ by offering a speech to her junior staff that promotes self-reflection as a method for becoming ‘autonomous’; then we watch Arushi narrativize her role as School Leader as one which, in truth, relies on the strategic relations she maintains with powerful government officials – and not her own ‘autonomy’. The second half of the chapter introduces, Divya, the Schools Director of Clear-Space, and Arushi’s line manager. Here, we see Divya finding ways to divert the responsibilities of her management role so that she can have more direct influence over children in school, and more time to coach staff on the path to individual self-actualisation. Both acts I read as motivated by the desire for purposed-leadership. What is produced in her action is the neoliberal discourse of ‘responsibilisation’, a social policy in which all individuals are expected to ‘self-manage’ regardless of the level of support and privilege they gain from family wealth or social status (Rose 1996; Trnka and Trundle 2014). I shed further light on the discourses of autonomy and self-management by exploring how the concept and experience of *family* influences the lifeworlds of these two women ‘leaders’. Overall, these stories of Arushi and Divya provide our first in-depth exploration of how educators’ desire for their own

personality development and professional progress hinder the education reform initiatives that they lead.

### **Vignette A: The school – bodies on parade**

Dawn. The school is quiet but for the peacock *pkaaws* and the rising din of horns from Delhi's waking streets. The heat builds. Parakeets sweep from one sweating roof to another and dart beneath the solar panels. Dead leaves swirl on the earthen games court. Hand in hand, the first of the children slope and skip through the gate. Their eyes drift longingly to the shiny plastic playground to their right as they march on dutifully to their classrooms. They plop down at their desks and rub the sleep out of their eyes. Outside, the screech of a motorised rickshaw, the swish of a sari, and the first teacher of the day marches into the compound.

By now, children are swarming into the school, a river of red-white-blue checked shirts, grey frocks, and trousers. The children peel to both sides to let a white sedan crawl past, the car stops, a man leaps out of the driver's seat and shuffles round to open the passenger door. Out steps the nurse teacher, now in her 35<sup>th</sup> year of government service; her age affects her ability to walk longer distances and her husband now drives her to school.

A man with a stick approaches a beaten metal pan tied to a tree – he strikes it: the school bell. Children hurriedly line up in the courtyard for assembly. The caretaker, Saudamar Bhai, has left the tree and is sliding a large loudspeaker towards the front of the cloister, two boys are called to lift the drum. The synthetic chimes and meditative drone of India's second national anthem begin to permeate the courtyard and a few brave voices sing the opening line of prayer 'Vannn-de Maataraaam ...'<sup>43</sup> The teachers have surrounded the children on parade; the eyes of the elders survey the young. The teachers do not sing. During the hymns, children have sheepishly joined lines and suffered scowls from the teacher most attendant. A tardy teacher strides towards the assembly from the gates, then freezes mid-step. The first note of the official national anthem of India – Jana Gana Mana – rises over the children's heads and I, the anthropologist, who have been scribbling observations from the doorway of a classroom, am forced to lay down my notebook.

---

<sup>43</sup> According to Sarkar (2006), Vande Mataram was sung as the 'de facto national anthem at Congress sessions from about 1894' (2006:3963).

*‘-tehhhn-SHUN’, ‘ahhhh-BDOH’*. A teacher bellows down between the lines of children. The bodies lazily scuffle between military attention feet together and ‘at ease’ feet-a-little-apart. A Class 5 boy is called to the front to begin the drumming, and another to model the moves of the upcoming exercise drill. The single metronome beat of the drum springs the students into choreographed life. The military grid of bodies now swings into a gestapo-tinted display of rooted calisthenics. No child leaves their grid position. They thrust their arms forward, upwards, back, and forth in mock-run, bend down to touch their toes, then twist from the hip and repeat. Not once during the drill does a child’s feet leave the floor. The children who perform most accurately never crack a smile.

### **Clear-Space and Dilip Vihar government primary: a PPP school**

This opening portrait displays Dilip Vihar government-run primary school as it wakes up for the working day. The government employees and children therein make scant appearance in this thesis because neither are the focus of my ethnographic enquiry. But just as the teachers survey the bodies of their charges at morning assembly, the Teach-Them alumni imagine both the children and the teachers as their subjects to transform.

After the fellowship, Teach-Them alumni are expected to search for ways to continue to improve the education of children from marginalised communities. All Teach-Them fellows teach in urban schools during their two-year fellowship, and most have taught in government (non-fee paying) schools. The Clear Space NGO partners with a handful of government primary schools in Delhi. It places educationalist consultants in partner schools to help improve ‘teaching and learning’ by providing established teachers with new methods and pedagogies. The school displayed above, one I have called Dilip Vihar, is the school in which I volunteered throughout my ethnographic fieldwork. As we can see in the military arrangement of children on parade, the government teachers begin the day with a thoroughly moral education. Hierarchy, discipline, order, obedience, patriotism: these are the values the teachers attempt to instil as children line up for morning calisthenics and hymns. Clear-Space, too, or at least the individuals within it, also have in mind a moral education for the children – even if the style of Clear-Space’s edification has more of an ethical texture.

In this chapter I show how two of Clear-Space's most passionate and dedicated educators negotiate their relationship with Dilip Vihar primary school. Arushi is the School Leader of Dilip Vihar and works directly in the school each day. Divya is Arushi's line manager, she is the Schools Director who oversees operations in all partnership schools. Both women are Teach-Them alumni and both, I argue, perform their roles in a way that allows them to practice purposed-leadership. One key method by which they achieve purposed-leadership is by imagining how their work will influence the social and ethical development of school children in Dilip Vihar.

I argue that both Arushi and Divya miss the sense of leadership and meaning they gained by being classroom teachers during their Teach-Them fellowship, and both attempt to regain that sense by having a direct influence over the children's growth. The fulfilment of their desire is hindered by the method Clear-Space have chosen for their partnership intervention: Clear-Space aim to support *teachers* develop their teaching, they do not ostensibly claim to replace government teachers with members of their own NGO team. As we saw in the brief vignette of Binu and Gita in Chapter 1 (which took place in a different Clear-Space partner school), there is little satisfaction to be had from guiding the teachers in their development. It is the children that change so quickly and provide immediate evidence to educators that their work has meaning. Furthermore, it is through the development of children that the *fantasy of self-actualisation* as a route to social change can be imagined.

But this chapter does not focus directly on how the desire for purposed-leadership affects the children in Dilip Vihar primary. Instead, I explore the collateral effects of desiring purposed-leadership. I show how younger members of the Clear-Space team become surrogates for the children who cannot quite be reached. I show how the desire to be recognised as a valuable member of the Teach-Them alumni movement produces behaviour which reveals an affective tension – the tension of both trying to effect change in schooling and retaining the *values* which Teach-Them claim to promote.

As I track the tensions experienced by these Teach-Them alumni, I explore how another – more silent – concept/value structures their behaviour: *family*. The word itself is in common circulation within Clear-Space. Arushi and her school team (me included) liked to see ourselves as a 'family' – the English word was used to describe our relationality and familiarity. Divya, in the Program Circles which we explore below, would remind employees that Clear-Space is

more of a ‘family’ than an ‘organisation’. I also present Arushi and Divya’s telling of their own experiences of biological family, and their attempts – as adults – to shape those families or make new ones. As the chapter will analyse, the slippage between biological family and professional community can serve both to support more vulnerable members of the wider Indian education reform network, and to cover over difference in attempts to idealised what a good ‘family member’ would sacrifice for their community.

Mixed up in these narratives of family is an image of an idealised, individuated, self-managing subject which both Arushi and Divya seem to hold. Here is the desire for the autonomous subject who manages and disciplines their bounded self through careful self-reflection and neoliberal ‘responsibilisation’. As we will see, ethnographically, the desire for this self-managed self appears most clearly at moments of *affective intensity*, where the threat of failure (in work, in leadership) draws subjects into narrow, purist, individualised notions of self which pull away from the collectivist values which these education movements also promote.

The chapter begins with two vignettes focused on Arushi: the first where she practices purposed-leadership by promoting self-reflection to her school-based team; the second where she presents a narrative of herself to her Clear-Space peers that displays her wily negotiation of government-school power dynamics. The chapter continues with a focus on Divya: first, how she attempts a remote ethical instruction of children via the NGO’s Student Vision; and second, how her frustration to practice ‘leadership’ and not management facilitates the development of her image of the ideal subject as ‘self-managed’ and ‘self-disciplined’.

## Arushi

### Arushi: A Biography

*Arushi was born in 1983 in Chennai, the first child to a Telegu-speaking mother – a repatriate from Burma – and a Tamil-speaking father. The pair had married against their families’ wishes but as per tradition lived with Arushi’s paternal grandparents, despite the latter’s opposition to the match. When Arushi was born, however, the family refused to have her in the house; they had wanted a boy instead. Arushi’s mother took her to live with her maternal grandmother.*

*She came to visit once a day with two or three rupees to buy milk. Her father came once a month on payday. When Arushi was two, her brother was born – and he lived with her parents. He was flushed with toys and praise and was later bought an air conditioner and computer so he could study.*

*Arushi's father worked as a sub-registrar in the local government. Both of Arushi's parents come from 'general' caste backgrounds. At age 5, just before she was enrolled in school, Arushi's father procured a Scheduled Caste (SC) reservation certificate for her, a savvy political move, he claimed, that would help Arushi get a government job of her own in the future.*

*At the end of Grade 6 a teacher pulled Arushi aside after dance class and told her she was a wonderful dancer. It was a moment that has stuck with Arushi for her entire life.*

*Arushi and her brother were both sent to private school, and to afford it, her mother used Arushi's SC certificate to secure a reduction in fees. Because Arushi was enrolled as a member of a Scheduled Caste admitted on a part scholarship, her name would be read out differently during morning registration. The whole class began to see her as marked by this SC status, that is, marked as different and lesser.*

*Arushi herself decided not to make use of the benefits of her SC certificate. Instead of registering for her school and university entrance exams in the SC category, she registered under the 'general ticket'. While at university studying engineering, Arushi was offered a free soldering class; despite enrolling as 'general caste', the college had learnt of her SC status and tried to direct her towards more caste-appropriate work. It was in college that Arushi began internalising her SC status and began to think of herself as inferior in some way.*

\*

*After college Arushi found a job at DELL, before moving on to telecommunication giant Ericsson. She also got married to a Brahmin man, who, she found out later, kept asking her family for money even though both himself and Arushi had well-paid jobs. Arushi had a daughter, Ananya. Her marriage began to breakdown. She had a revelation: her corporate life*

*was empty. She was flying from city to city across India, drinking at 5-Star hotels and always had a cupboard stocked full of luxuries – but it didn't feel right.*

*In 2016, Arushi quit her job, ended her marriage, and enrolled on the Landmark Forum, a 3-day motivational seminar designed to help participants locate the negative stories of self that restrict them from taking risks to achieve their dreams.<sup>44</sup> During the Forum, Arushi realised how deeply she had internalised a sense of inferiority based on a lifetime of being associated with a Scheduled Caste. She had also subconsciously believed that her husband was better than her, simply because he was from a Brahmin family.*

*She had recently moved to Gurgaon, just south of Delhi, due her husband's work transfer, and began volunteering to teach children from tribal communities online through a small NGO. It was here she found her calling to teach. She applied to the Teach-Them fellowship as there was no upper age limit. She got selected, and was then placed in a large government secondary school on the border of the city. As a single mother with a small stipend, it was difficult for her to find accommodation. In the first few months, Arushi would go to school on an empty stomach. As a dedicated Teach-Them fellow she threw her energy into planning classes and making teaching and learning resources for her classroom. She prioritised Ananya's health and well-being and ate hardly anything herself. At school, her companion Teach-Them fellows would offer her their tiffin boxes and Arushi would take small bites; her co-fellows became worried. One day, she came home to find people rifling through the cupboards of her kitchen. She smiled and began to cry. It was her co-fellows, they had procured a spare key from the landlord, bought vegetables and dal, and were cooking for Arushi and her daughter. They told Arushi she had to look after herself and from now on they would come by and cook whenever she needed support. The luxury goods had disappeared from Arushi's shelves, but they had been replaced with a community of young educators, a family of Teach-Them fellows, hungry for social change.*

---

<sup>44</sup> The Landmark Forum formally began in 1991 with the inauguration of Landmark Worldwide, a company born out of licensing the rights to use the intellectual property of Werner Erhard, the founder of the *est* (Erhard Seminars Training) system in the 1970s. Erhard writes extensively on the philosophy of leadership, and even on metaphysics, with a paper on the ontology of leadership (Erhard et al 2012).



*At the beginning of the fellowship, Arushi's father died, then six months later, her grandmother, and two days before completion, her mother also. She had little contact with her brother, who was living in the US, and a court-case with her ex-husband was soon to begin.*

*In March 2018 Arushi began her role as Clear-Space's inaugural School Leader at Dilip Vihar, a government-run primary school in South Delhi. It is here in the school that we watch her in these pages ...*

\*

I have compiled the above biography based on snippets of conversation I had with Arushi over a year of working alongside her in school. During this time, the overwhelming feeling I had was being part of a family. The NGO team of educators lived a separate life to that of the government teachers. We would begin our day huddled around the teacher's desk in the 'Smart Class', a large hall in which an interactive whiteboard had recently been installed and which our team trained government teachers to use. Similarly, after assembly, the teachers would gather in the Principal's office and drink *chai* before returning to their classrooms to teach. Largely, we in the NGO team stayed in the Smart Class all day: it was where we stored our laptops, where we ate lunch, where we printed teaching resources for teachers, and where we continued to work on lesson plans after the kids went home.

But it was not just the proximity in which we worked that made the team feel like family, it was Arushi's leadership. The above biography highlights Arushi's difficult upbringing, her rejection as a girl-child, the anxiety of internalising inferiority through caste status, and – in her case – the added complexity of it being misapplied.<sup>45</sup> It also shows how completing a personal development course – Landmark Forum – and joining the movement of Teach-Them helped Arushi shake off self-doubt and develop a more robust self-image.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> I am of course not suggesting that I believe in caste hierarchy, but I do believe that those who are marked as lower caste often internalise a sense of inferiority. Furthermore, it seems Arushi's story is rather unique, although there is a long history of certain castes protesting for reservations of their own, it seems rare that a general caste family would actively disguise their own daughter as lower caste in order to receive government benefits.

<sup>46</sup> A further note on Landmark: Sanjay Srivastava (in press) reveals the connection between Landmark and the Indian government: the anthropologist interviews an ex-Landmark employee who now has a key role in the Government of India's Skills Development Centre.

In my view, and as we explore below, a key part of Arushi's self-image is that she is dedicated to coaching and leading others. Indeed, the value of purposed-leadership promoted by Teach-Them only compounded an already present disposition in Arushi: that happiness and fulfilment in life comes only by finding a purpose and having the confidence to live out one's dreams.

But one cannot live out one's dreams alone. Key to the method of leadership as a realisation of purpose is that a leader needs people to lead. The way Arushi tells it, her own parents failed to give her the guidance she needed and failed to value her as a person. In the two vignettes given below, we see Arushi mobilising leadership in two very different ways, in each she develops strategies to build new – and negotiate existing – 'families'.

In the first, Arushi performs the role of 'mother-coach', a maternal leader who pushes her brood to develop an individualised selfhood where one's actions are dictated by one's personal emotions and desires. I introduce this concept of 'mother-coach' to analyse how Arushi acts as leader. The mother element of the assemblage relates to the 'modern' middle-class mother in a nuclear family.<sup>47</sup> She is the sole caregiver, the one who wants her children to avoid the tiring responsibilities and personal limitations of a joint family and instead find their own independent purpose in life. The coach relates to the type of guidance and support Arushi has received in her professional life, at Landmark, and with Teach-Them.

In the second, Arushi struggles with the pragmatics of gaining power in a hierarchical bureaucracy; in my reading, she uses the tactics of a newly married daughter-in-law entering the home of her husband and negotiating a place of influence amongst the women's domestic household. I argue that the school itself mirrors the dynamics of the South Asian joint family as represented in popular culture.<sup>48</sup> In such, Arushi must put away her discomfort at taking part in this network of power for the sake of Teach-Them's purpose: to improve the education quality in India.

A quick aside. One planned arc of this thesis is that the chapters begin from leadership as practised in school itself – face to face with children – and end with educational leaders who

---

<sup>47</sup> I have chosen the term 'mother' to describe Arushi's relationship to her professional juniors because it is the family relationship that seems most accurate. Although Kasak and Suraj, Arushi's two main charges, address her by the Hindi honorific *didi* – meaning 'older sister', I asked Kasak what she would say if she had to describe Arushi as a family member, and she chose the word 'mother'.

<sup>48</sup> For example, *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (2000); *Kyuki saas bhi kabhi bahu thi* (2000); *Kundali Bhagya* (2017)

aim to revolutionise schooling through grand, top-down policy change. Although the vignettes do not display Arushi's work with children, my point is that her proximity to the site where education interventions take place induce her to develop different articulations of purposed-leadership to the social entrepreneurs who appear in later chapters.

### **Vignette B: Arushi as mother-coach**

It was my first day of school. Two weeks before the start of a new academic year and I'd been invited by Arushi, the School Leader, to help plan the NGO's interventions for the year ahead. It was March 2019, and I had just turned thirty-three. The school compound seemed empty as I crept in mid-morning, but as I sauntered towards the U-shaped concrete block, a wide-grinned young man popped his head out of a classroom and beckoned me inside.

Arushi and her team were in the middle of an activity, and I was encouraged to jump in and join them. Arushi's 'team' consisted of Suraj, the Community Aggregator, a 20-year-old man in his first job after high school, who was completing a degree in Business via a university distance-learning course. Kasak, a 19-year-old woman who knew of Arushi because she had studied in the government school where Arushi completed her two-year Teach-Them fellowship. And Preeti, 22, a teacher substitute, soon to be made redundant.<sup>49</sup>

After a couple of hours going through curriculum textbooks and planning how to blend the content with my drama lessons, a political discussion emerged:

Arushi: ... the system doesn't work!<sup>50</sup>

Me: Why not?

Arushi: Because we can't speak back to elders, it's in our culture. And if I'm a woman, I shouldn't raise my voice against a man. Even at Clear-Space, we see the same, people hesitate to speak if Baan [CEO of the NGO] or someone is in the room,

---

<sup>49</sup> By the time I joined Clear-Space in March 2019 it had been decided that the NGO would no longer provide supplementary teachers for the government. Instead, the intervention would seek to train existing government teachers. The only teaching the NGO officially provided was either via partnerships (e.g., music teachers via a music education NGO), or individual unpaid volunteers (e.g. myself as drama teacher).

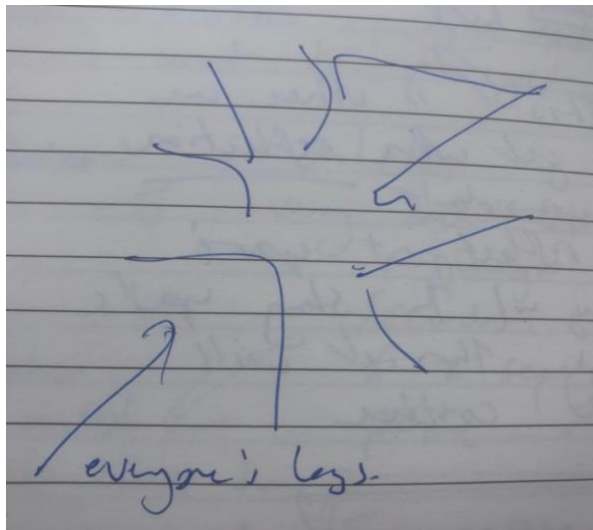
<sup>50</sup> The conversations in this vignette took place in a mix of English (70%) and Hindi (30%). At the time my Hindi was weak, but because all technical and professional words were spoken in English I was able to follow. Here, I have translated all transcriptions into English.

even Suraj won't open his mouth in a circle group. I don't like the feeling of powerlessness, I get agitated, I have to act if someone makes me feel powerless.

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 ...

The room has shifted. As Arushi warms up to her speech, Kasak, Suraj, and Preeti crowd closer, their legs interlock like the branches of a bird's nest.



*Arushi, Kasak and Suraj's legs huddled together excitedly*

I sit half a metre away, scribbling, and throwing questions in from afar. What I am witnessing, although I don't yet know it, is the intimacy of Arushi's mother-coach method of purposed-leadership. Arushi continues:

Arushi: It's *your* problem [not speaking up] Suraj, no-one else's. *[then to me]* Suraj used to not be comfortable with these conversations, but he seems to have changed.

At first, I'm stunned at this aside. Suraj is still sitting there, and Arushi speaks as if he's absent. But perhaps in this moment Arushi is more interested in presenting herself to me *as a leader*, than she is interested *in leading*. I have consciously chosen to showcase my very first school

meeting with Arushi, Suraj and Kasak because, in my view, my intrusion into the school came as a challenge to Arushi. She did not know my politics; she did not know that we would in fact build a fruitful intellectual friendship. At this point, I am just a white man from England who has come to study the NGO. Let us look closer at the mother-coach in action:

Arushi: There's one more person in the room who I want to have a conversation like this with, but they are not ready.

Preeti: Me?

Arushi: No, her [*pointing at Kasak*]. Kasak first lies about a situation, to soften it, because she is scared of being judged for having a 'bad character'.

Kasak: It's not about 'character'

Arushi: Does society set limits, or do I? [*to me*] 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 internalised 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.

Arushi here seems to display a belief in a 'true' inner-self: an image of the self in which one's own feelings, if listened to carefully enough, provide enough guidance with which to make decisions about one's own life. This is a worldview that has protected Arushi. As we saw in the above biography, self-reliance was Arushi's only option for success in a family who first dismissed her, and later submitted her to the psychological strain of being assigned a low-caste status when she had no access to people of that caste for solidarity and support.<sup>51</sup> After the revelatory experiences of the Landmark Forum and Teach-Them fellowship, Arushi is convinced that an individual must be motivated by their own vision, values, and feelings alone.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Arendt (2018 [1958]) for how exile from a community is the harshest form of punishment.

<sup>52</sup> Later in the year Arushi convinced her new romantic partner, Raj, to pay the 27,000 rupee fee (£300) for Suraj to attend the three-day Landmark Forum. Raj also paid for himself and another NGO junior to attend. The Forum had a profound immediate effect on Suraj, and he told Arushi and I how emotional the experience had been for him. However, by the end of my fieldwork it was not clear how Suraj's life had changed as result of the Forum, and Suraj spoke about the experience less and less. As explore in Chapter 1, is interesting to compare Arushi's experience of Landmark to the volunteer training programs featured by Andrea Muehlebach, in which educators told new recruits to represent their lives as a sequence of events that they were to interpret as the result of their own active, agentive selves – and how self-reflection was the first step towards proper public conduct (Muehlebach 2012:125).

Arushi here is operating with the same conception of self as Teach-Them, and just as Teach-Them induce fellows to adopt the same values and purpose as the organisation itself, Arushi pushes Kasak to replace the values of her biological parents with Arushi's own. It is Arushi who believes Kasak should value her own feelings, a view Arushi opposes to the apparent conservatism of Kasak's parents. In this moment of *affective intensity*, Arushi sees the world in binary: either Kasak ignores the truth (her feelings) to placate her parents, or she embraces the truth, releases herself from her parents' boundaries, and begins the journey into self-actualisation. The affective intensity of the moment is increased because the anthropologist is present; Arushi must both coach her charges and perform for this observant outsider.

But the intensity of Arushi's desire to coach Suraj and Kasak is not fully explained by her individual psychological needs; she is also a subject of Teach-Them who wants to reaffirm her position in that new family by finding spaces where she can practice purposed-leadership. This is the family who came to her house to cook her food when she and her daughter were alone in a new city and Arushi had a classroom full of kids to care for.

As I mentioned above, Clear-Space's change in intervention policy means it is no longer part of Arushi's job to teach kids. Instead, I argue, she invests in her role as mother-coach as the next best thing: Suraj and Kasak are only a few years older than the girls she taught during her Teach-Them fellowship, and they make decent surrogates who she can lead and fill with purpose.

Let's sit with Arushi's coaching a little longer. Kasak has just explained how her parents would be hurt if they learnt she has a boyfriend.

Arushi: Every time you say, "I don't want to hurt them", you are questioning them, you are creating a narrative about your parents being backward/traditional because *you* are afraid of getting hurt. If you don't reflect, and you're happy with the story you're telling, then it will continue. But if you're not happy with the story, then reflect, look deeper, tell a different story ...

Arushi's focus on 'story' here reveals the importance of narrative to the theory of self-aware leadership. Arushi both models the power of narrative – through telling her own story – and analyses narrative power by explaining how 'bad storytelling' (as she calls it below) negatively impacts individuals on the journey to becoming self-directed agents.

Arushi: If we don't reflect, how can we teach kids to reflect? ... you don't have to change post-reflection, but at least then you *know*. Suraj, if you don't want to ask questions because you feel judged, then fine, don't ask, but at least you know why [that it's your own fear of judgment stopping you] and won't blame others.

According to Arushi, self-reflection allows us to see our limitations and weaknesses. She argues that Suraj is limited by his fear of judgement. But the limitation is not the problem, the problem is that Suraj is not aware of this limitation because he does not practice self-reflection. At this point in her speech, it seems that Arushi is less in a dialogue with Suraj and more delivering an inspirational monologue to herself. It seems she is attempting to remind herself of the method by which she wants to lead, and the purpose of that leadership.

Arushi: We build the muscle of bad storytelling in our head. We tell stories about ourselves over and over and then we believe them. We, here in school, need to build kids' power to reflect right now, so that they can stop telling narratives that aren't real.

It's all about hearing people's stories and debunking unhelpful ones. That's the only reason I do this job, to give kids a chance to learn to reflect. 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.

This final line seems to be a clear case of what psychologists would call 'projection'. Arushi pictures how 'miserable' her own life was before she learnt how to reflect, and before she found her purpose. In this story, life without purpose is miserable. In the speech, Arushi is the child who was finally given the chance to reflect (first through Landmark Forum, then through Teach-Them), and Arushi is now the leader who must offer this chance to others. As a child and young adult, Arushi produced a story in which she was not valuable as a person, a story she developed based on the way those close to her treated her: she felt unlovable because her family wouldn't live with her and favoured her brother, she felt unworthy because she alone was given a Scheduled Caste status. Arushi pictures herself as a child in this current school and uses that image to motivate her purposed-leadership, 'mother-coach' sense of self.

And she is not naïve; Arushi does not think each individual can achieve whatever they desire simply by willing it. As is clear in her speech above, she wants ‘kids to reflect on their situations and who they are’ – she wants them to realise that they are who they are *because* of the situations they are in. The method of self-change-through-self-reflection does not allow a subject to conjure a new self in any way they dream it, it asks them to minutely explore how their self-image has been produced by the circumstances (family, school, culture) in which one has been raised. Reflection has been Arushi’s salvation, and she must pass it on.

\*

I use the assemblage ‘mother-coach’ to highlight the distinct genealogies that inform Arushi’s method of purposed-leadership. The ‘mother’ part is informed by a collection of desires, (i) she wants to be the mother she never had, (ii) she knows the value of family (she felt it as part of Teach-Them), (iii) she has been a classroom teacher, and like the government-school teachers she works alongside, she too feels the ‘mother’ metaphor is apt for a teacher who is as interested in her charges’ moral development as much as their academic.<sup>53</sup> The ‘coach’ part is shaped by the experiences of leadership in which she has felt most inspired, 1) the life-coach methods of the Landmark Forum where participants must revoke the stories they have learnt about themselves and set new life goals, 2) the management system of Teach-Them where fellows are given mentors (Program Managers) who encourage them to develop their own autonomy, 3) and the theory of self as the home of a purpose (a ‘little light’) that Teach-Them promote.

But as a ‘mother-coach’, why must Arushi take Suraj and Kasak as her focus and not the children themselves? Two reasons. One: Suraj and Kasak are like the children: neither have a community that encourages them to first value their own feelings and emotions and then stand up for those feelings. Two: as I mention above, the Clear-Space management team have decided that Clear-Space will no longer directly deliver education projects to the children in their partner schools. This leaves Arushi at a loss: she cannot teach the children to reflect on their values, learn how to stand up for their own feelings, and choose a self-actualising life path – and so she teaches those she does have access to: Suraj and Kasak.

---

<sup>53</sup> . The school operates with something called the ‘mother system’: a teacher doesn’t always teach the same age group but travels with a set of children as they begin school aged 6 and remains their class teacher until they graduate from primary school aged around 11.



The final line of the above speech reveals Arushi's commitment to the purpose of Teach-Them at its baldest. It is a dramatic and hyperbolic statement delivered in a moment of *affective intensity*. Arushi is about to embark on her second year as School Leader of Dilip Vihar. She has been denied access to the children she loves to teach and must respond to the inquisitive stare of the anthropologist. Moments of affective intensity do not reveal the truth of subjects, they reveal the simplified narratives humans deliver under pressure, and illuminate the insecure selves who cling on to these narratives. In this case, they show us how Arushi's sense of self is embedded in her role as a leader-educator. As we see in the chapters to come – with Baan in Chapter 3, and Prashant in Chapter 4 – the blending of self-as-person and self-as-leader is a central feature of Delhi's network of entrepreneurial educators. And as we see in part two of this chapter, Divya, the Schools Director of Clear-Space, also feels frustrated that she cannot lead children in the discovery of their own values and feelings.

But before we move on from Arushi I want to display how she self-narrates her role in the school within a different metaphor of family. How she plays the incoming *bahu* (daughter-in-law) amongst the powerful network of women already present in her new *sasoral* (husband's family home). Here, she must articulate a different version of self, one less idealistic and more pragmatic, one less individually noble and one more implicated in the messiness of everyday relationality.

### **Arushi between two families**

If her role as Suraj and Kasak's coach is a way Arushi can fulfil her desire for idealised purposed-leadership, then the way she processes her interactions with government school officials reveals the psychological complexity of fulfilling her purpose through less ideal means.

In the next vignette, Arushi narrates how she has found a position of power in the school by gaining the patronage of the School Inspector. The pragmatics of patronage and politics has been carefully explored by South Asian anthropologists, most notably in Piliavsky's recent edited collection (Piliavsky 2014). But patronage has no place in Teach-Them's narrative of social change. For Teach-Them, it is self-reflective leadership that will draw individuals away

from their embeddedness in sectarian communities and therefore disintegrate the social connections that continue to structure professional and political society.

The anxiety that Arushi displays in the vignette below reveals the impasse she has reached: to gain favour with the School Inspector (SI) will help Clear-Space maintain and expand their government partnerships with the school; the SI's power can be leveraged to secure further access to those in superior government positions who decide how, if it all, the government will partner with education NGOs. But accepting the patronage of the SI goes against the self-sufficient, self-reliant image of self that Arushi holds at her core.

Here, we see Arushi's mixed feelings about presenting her new relation of patronage to her Teach-Them alumni colleagues at Clear-Space. But they are not just colleagues, they are family. As we see later in the chapter with Schools Director, Divya, the Clear-Space NGO presents itself as a family in which all staff are family members. It is part of the organisational strategy of the education start-up to encourage team members to be emotionally connected and supportive of each other in the way an ideal family might operate.

What's more, Arushi is also part of another family: she is a member of Dilip Vihar government primary school. Let me extend the metaphor in this way: Arushi is the natal daughter of Teach-Them/Clear-Space who has recently been married off to the government school. The school is her *sasoral*, her husband's family home, a place infamous in Indian popular culture because of the difficulties daughters-in-law's face when finding a place in this new family structure. Anthropologists both classical (Kurtz 1992) and contemporary (Donner 2008) have detailed how young wives learn to negotiate new kinship structures as they enter their husband's joint family.

In this metaphor, Arushi is the daughter of Teach-Them, a 'modern' (neo)liberal family who have trained her to be independent, principled, and valiant in her pursuit of justice for children educationally underserved by the government and society. The start-up Clear-Space is an avatar of Teach-Them who has chosen to wed Arushi to a different kind of family: the traditional, hierarchical, co-dependent bureaucracy of an Indian government school. Just how arranged marriages are traditionally used to further political and economic prosperity (both in Asia and Europe), Clear-Space must pair up one of their own with a powerful family – in this case, the State. By doing so, Arushi – the daughter of Teach-Them – can gain the trust of the

new family and further the political aims of her natal home, that is, she can develop education provision according to the vision of Teach-Them.

I have in part chosen the metaphor of Arushi as daughter-in-law because – as we see below – she herself speaks of relations at school in terms of domestic hierarchy, and – as we’ve seen above – the concept of family seems awkwardly entangled in Teach-Them’s conception of purposed-leadership. How does one become an individualised, purpose-driven leader and still make time for supporting one’s family? And which family must one support – the biological one was born into, the husband’s one marries into, or the chosen one in which you’ve found a socio-professional cause?

This is indeed the dilemma in which Arushi finds herself. What we see below is the moment when Arushi reports back to her natal family on her progress as ideological infiltrator. But it is not so easy to rigidly stick to one set of values when ensconced in a new family with different ones.

Furthermore, the following vignette shows Arushi in another moment of *affective intensity*, on the *threshold* – to borrow a Deleuzean term from anthropologist Bhrigupati Singh (2015) – between two families who operate within different lifeworlds. It is the intensity of her place between these two families that make Arushi’s speech so affective. But it is this affect that in turn reveals the psychological and emotional importance of her dual-family subject position.

### **Vignette C: Arushi as strategizing *bahu*: the realpolitik of school hierarchy**

It is a quiet Friday afternoon at the Dilip Vihar school. Arushi and Tricia, the Assistant School Leader at Dilip Vihar, are having their check-in with Devika, the Head of HR at Clear-Space. Devika, hunched over a laptop on a child-sized school chair, is recording the school team’s feedback on a spreadsheet. It is my entry, perhaps, that prompts the conversation to go macro.

Devika: Rohit, from our community, is in the government, but still nothing happens about teachers hitting kids.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Largely because this conversation took place between three Teach-Them alumni, the entire conversation happened in English apart from the occasional Hindi phrase.

Devika's opening line is divisive. She reinscribes the bounds of community/family: it is the modern NGO vs the unreformed government-school teachers. Even when someone from 'our community' (read: Teach-Them) joins the government (read: the opposition), he is unable to effect change.

Arushi: Class/caste discrimination is in the teachers' blood. Principal Maam won't let kids touch the books in the library, she says they're too expensive, she says kids will damage them. When I fill in the online admission documents with Vasu Maam, the indifference she shows to the job of the mother is staggering. It's a requirement, to put in the parents' profession, but if there's any doubt over what the occupation of the mother might be, she says "probably just a housewife" and puts that in.

Arushi sides with Devika and others the school-teachers, the sisters she must live with in her new *sasoral* (marital home). It is *they* who are casteist, they who are sexist enough to categorise motherhood and homemaking as a menial profession.

Devika: We expect too much from teachers. Yes, every principal *has* gone out of their way for kids, but they don't want to do it all the time. '*Kitna karu?*' (How many times shall I do it?), they say. It's all a power and authority game.

Tricia: Teachers get scolded on not doing admin, not on whether kids learn.

Arushi: Have you seen how Pallavi Singh (School Inspector) speaks to our principal? It's horrible. You feel disgusted with yourself by the way she treats you. It's like how a landlord treats a maid.

Here begins Arushi's self-telling of her relationship with the School Inspector (SI), Pallavi Singh. Arushi has already lambasted the teachers for their class/casteism, and here she shows its hierarchy all the way up: the SI treats the principal 'like a maid'. The invocation of landlord/domestic worker relations reveals how the metaphor of family permeates Arushi's own imagining of school dynamics.

Arushi: Every time Principal Maam gets a call from Pallavi Maam, she calls me. Pallavi Maam speaks to me nicely, and that's why the Principal respects me.

Now Arushi presents herself as the resourceful *bahu* (daughter-in-law) who knows how to make the most of a feud between two senior female figures in her new *sasoral*. Let us imagine that Arushi is sitting with her natal sisters, drinking coffee at a mall, and ranting about how – despite her unease with the moral behaviour of her *sasoral* (hitting children, casteism, sexism) – she is doing her best to gain power where she can. Why is it important for Arushi to transmit this information back to her NGO natal sisters? Perhaps to help make sense of her conundrum: she disagrees with certain practices some teachers condone (e.g. hitting children), but recognises that without a working relationship with these teachers she cannot achieve her professional aims. As a Teach-Them alumni, she is keen to display the values taught to her at the training centre: ‘excellence’ and ‘integrity’ being two of them. But she also recognises that the patronage of the SI gives her more power over the Principal, which in turn gives her more power over the operation of the school.

Arushi: When Pallavi Maam came for the government minister’s health event, I tried to avoid her. I didn’t want her to be sweet to me in front of the teachers. But she found me, and spoke nicely, and you should have seen how the atmosphere changed in that moment. The smiles of the teachers disappeared instantly.

The further Arushi continues with her story, the clearer the stakes at play. Arushi must manage two different images of self. In one, she is a self-effacing ‘sister-in-law’ who doesn’t want to be outcast by the other younger women of the *sasoral* – the teachers – who would make her traditional allies against the matriarchs – the Principal and SI. On the other, Arushi sees herself as the ambitious and righteous educationalist whose dreams of effecting change in education structures regardless of the mundane feelings of real-life teachers.

Arushi: For the first six months, the Principal didn’t know why we were in the school. Now, when Pallavi walks into the school, the first thing [Principal] Maam does is look for me.

On the date of Devika’s visit Clear-Space had been partnered with Dilip Vihar government primary for over 18 months. Arushi is aware that Clear-Space had been failing to have a deep influence over the school’s teaching and learning practices – but no-one at the NGO can directly admit this. As we see in the following chapter, Baan, the NGO’s founder and CEO, goes through seams of doubt in which he desperately desires quantitative, metrically-procured evidence proving Clear-Space are having a positive impact on the school. Devika has visited

the school in part to see what is stopping Arushi and Tricia from collecting hard data for Baan. Arushi's outburst above is a moment of indecorum, she is naming how little the Principal really trusts the NGO. But Arushi is learning to lead in a different way, she has found a route to gaining influence over what happens in the school that compromises her 'integrity' for the gain of influence – she is making herself, her personhood (i.e. not the work of the NGO), indispensable to the Principal who runs the school.

Personal relations and patronage, sometimes judged as nepotism or corruption, are precisely the illiberal, unmeritocratic norms which many members of the Indian Education Reform Movement see as endemic to government education systems. But here, Arushi is revealing that one clear reason the NGO has been able to continue its partnership with the school is that she has somehow gained the patronage of the SI, with whom the Principal must maintain clement relations if she hopes to make her bureaucratic life that little but easier.<sup>55</sup>

\*

What does Arushi's speech above tell us about how the valuing of purposed-leadership operates within the Teach-Them alumni community? Arushi's speech is a product of affective intensity. Layers of affect pile up within her, causing her to deliver a self-narrative that illuminates the contours of this affect. She tells the story with a cavalier bravado which wasn't uncommon for her, but that, in this instance, carried a timbre and intensity that revealed a touch of shame. She sees the value of the SI's patronage but isn't fully comfortable with it because it puts her in competition with both the schoolteachers and her NGO colleagues. The school sisters have passed their judgement: 'their smiles disappeared instantly' when the SI showed Arushi favour. The response of her NGO sisters is more complex, because they, like Arushi, are negotiating both how they can maintain access to the children – who they must lead to fulfil the desire for purposed-leadership – and how to maintain a coherent self-image as someone who fights for the mission of Teach-Them, not for their own individual career.

---

<sup>55</sup> How exactly the SI can make life difficult for the Principal is a different question. Anecdotally, from Arushi I learnt that the SI has influence over how the physical space of the school grounds can be commandeered by the government for other ventures. Indeed, during my time in the school not one but two elections took place: national elections in May 2019; Delhi elections in February 2020. During this time the school was used as a storehouse for furniture needed for polling booths, with the noise of ferrying trucks making classes difficult to teach. What was clear to me is that the Principal took extreme precaution to present the school in the most favourable light whenever superior government officials came to visit – for example, she wanted me to cut kids from the school play who were failing to shine on stage.

I've chosen to display Arushi in these two contrasting school environments to illuminate how the value of purposed-leadership struggles to hold shape when submitted to the regular pressure of family-framed socio-professional relations. In both, Arushi produces a narrative of herself; first for an audience of potential followers, second for a sisterhood (of which I am included) who question how school education can be improved for India's marginalised. In both, Arushi experiments with an alternative route to self-actualisation, one that does not involve one's own self-actualisation but instead provides one with a role where you facilitate the fantasy of self-actualisation for others. In the first instance, a perhaps more optimistic fantasy, Arushi will inspire Suraj and Kasak to live lives even more independent and purpose-driven than her own, based on personal, internal values that they have had the chance to discover in their lives earlier than Arushi did. In the second, perhaps more pragmatic, Arushi tiptoes toward a reflection of her own behaviour in which she must admit that her values she promotes are not always aligned to her actions.

## Divya

### **Divya: a biography**

*Divya grew up in Delhi in a wealthy post-Partition Punjabi family. Divya describes her father as 'very forward thinking in terms of developing us to earn for ourselves' but also 'very patriarchal'. Divya describes this as a 'duality': 'I was getting one thing: think for yourself, be your own person, but at the same time I was seeing this injustice happening – with my mom. My mom was the emotional one, and for us that was always weakness, instead you have to be strong, you have to be excellent.' She continued: when I was born there was 'a lot of privilege' but later my father's company got into debt, and there was 'financial trouble'.*

*Divya went to one of the most elite, high-fee private secondary schools in Delhi. At age 14 she began volunteering with an education NGO run by the CEO of her school. She supported teachers in an NGO-run school that served the children of the maintenance staff who worked in her secondary school. Wanting to do more for these children, she set up her own after-school*

*tutoring project, housed in her own elite school, where she would teach the children of maintenance staff daily.*

*In school, Divya didn't gel with many of her peers. They were only interested in 'going crazy, buying things, going out, sex, drugs' and were 'so rich and privileged that they didn't give a shit about anyone else.' 'I recognised why my parents were parenting me in a certain way. I valued conversations. I didn't have a craving for those things [listed above] because I had a centring in my family, which is why my family is extremely important to me.' Important, maybe, but not always easy.*

*'It was not a very emotionally expressive relationship [with my parents]; it was almost like professionals. I had to make a Powerpoint presentation if I wanted to go on holiday; if I wanted something I had to present my case.' The family philosophy was, 'whatever you want, you push yourself to earn it. That was deeply inculcated. There wasn't space for comfort. I always knew how to have my shit together, but it was always technical fixes. Which is why I'm always very strong at planning, always very organised.'*

*Divya wanted to study Liberal Arts in college but was convinced by her family that a business degree would be better because it, 'opens doors'. Aged 18, she enrolled at a university in the US. She asked herself, 'what is the most non-business thing I can do while still having a business degree? I finally found Business Economics and Public Policy.' During college vacations in the US, Divya would 'go on service trips' with Teach-Them's American parent organisation. She said, 'The US is really full of privilege for me. All the other international kids from India were super money, super flashy. I was on scholarship. I wasn't very extraverted. I didn't want to do drugs etc'.*

*Divya left college and returned to Delhi in 2012, the same year Teach-Them began operating in the city. Following the advice of her parents, she applied for jobs at 'big consulting firms'. 'I got a job with KPMG. It's coveted. And I walked out of the interview thinking: oh my god, if I do this, my life is over, this is all I'm going to do for the rest of my life'. My Dad said: 'if you want to get into education, start something of your own. A for-profit enterprise of course.' Instead, Divya went to visit a Teach-Them classroom. Despite her father's exasperation at the small stipend offered by Teach-Them, Divya applied for a fellowship and joined the program.*



*During her Teach-Them fellowship, Divya taught 11- to 14-year-olds in the same all girls' government school where Arushi completed her own fellowship two years later.*

\*

The entirety of the above story is drawn from a one-to-one interview I conducted with Divya towards the end of my fieldwork. Divya narrates her childhood as one in which she had a strict but loving family, went to a school where she felt at odds with the hedonistic motivations of her peers, and where her sense of injustice at the inequity of education in India came to her at a very early age.

Below, I explore Divya's most direct contribution to redressing this inequality – her development of a Student Vision for the NGO start-up Clear-Space. I argue that Divya's drive to create this Student Vision is fuelled by her desire for purposed-leadership. I also explore how – like Arushi – the method by which Divya develops her role as leader is informed both by her experience of biological family, and the way 'family' seems to circulate as an 'Indian' value.

### **Clear-Space's 'Student Vision'**

In August 2018 Clear-Space hired an educational consultancy to help them develop a clearer vision of what the organisation stands for and what it is trying to do.<sup>56</sup> The consultancy organised a series of day-long workshops where the entire Clear-Space staff brainstormed this question. One key discovery was that Clear-Space didn't have a clear understanding of how they wanted children to grow and develop. It was decided that the organisation needed a 'Student Vision': an in-depth statement that expounded the skills and dispositions that Clear-Space wanted to instil in children.

Over the next 18 months, Divya worked with a host of Clear-Space staff who volunteered time to develop this Student Vision. In January 2020, Divya and her team presented the Student

---

<sup>56</sup> This consultancy is also a Teach-Them-alumni-founded education start-up.

Vision to the rest of the organisation. At the core of the Vision is a collection of skills and dispositions. These are commonly referred to as the Student Vision *values*. They are:

Collaboration

Critical Thinking

Creativity

Empathy

Grit

Curiosity

When I asked Divya about the origin of these values, she confirmed that they were heavily inspired by two other educational discourses already well known to Teach-Them alumni and the Delhi education space at large: social-emotional learning and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

The two most influential interventions in Delhi as per ‘social-emotional learning’ are the Delhi government’s Happiness Curriculum and the Emory University-based SEE learning. Both were launched in Delhi itself (in 2018 and 2019 respectively) and both recruited the Dalai Lama to help design and launch their projects. The Happiness Curriculum was being developed at the very same time as Clear-Space’s Student Vision, and was developed in collaboration with six education NGOs. In Chapter 4 we will spend time with Prashant and Rupali – the founders of Kshamta – which is one of these six partner NGOs. The Happiness Curriculum names ‘critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration’ as the four main skills the curriculum is designed to develop in students (Happiness Curriculum 2019). As is clear, two of these – critical thinking and collaboration – are identical to Clear-Space’s Student Vision.

As per ‘21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills’, Teach-Them use the movement’s ‘4Cs’ as a key part of their training Centre. Clear-Space pick up these ‘skills’ and carry them into their own Student Vision. The ‘Four Cs’ are Collaboration, Critical Thinking, Creativity and Curiosity; they make up the majority of the Student Vision values.

My point here is that the values of Clear-Space’s Student Vision are not personal or unique to Clear-Space; these are ‘values’ shared by Teach-Them, certain actors in the Delhi government, and many other education projects I spent time with in the in the city. In my analysis, Clear-Space’s Student Vision is indicative of the ‘values’ of the IERM at large.

As we know from Divya's self-presentation above, she is a doer, not an armchair philosopher. She doesn't just want to talk about values, she wants to instil them in children. The below vignette displays Divya's first step towards this inculcation: she designs a game through which she can assess at what level children are already showing the Vision's dispositions and skills.

### **Vignette D: The 2050 game**

Twenty-three people sit on the floor of a small room in a fully detached house in a wealthy enclave of south-west Delhi. The house belongs to Divya's extended family, the top floor, which consists of three rooms and a large outdoor terrace, acts as Clear-Space's central office. Most days the office is quiet; Baan taps away on his laptop, filling in a grant application, Ashok phones the stationers for more printer paper, Divya and Avi return from the hipster coffee shop where I usually spend afternoons writing notes.

Today, all Clear-Space staff are present, apart from those posted in a remote village in Uttarakhand.<sup>57</sup> It is January 13, 2020, and the school children are still on their winter break. Divya has called a 'Program Circle' – an all-staff meeting in which she hosts introspective games and arts-based team-building activities. Today, Divya's first exercise runs as follows: she places six pieces of paper in the middle of the room. On each is printed one of the six Student Vision values. Divya asks us to walk around the room looking at the six values and slowly move toward the value with which we currently most resonate. I hover over the 'Curiosity' sheet and look up to find Arushi, Tricia and Rakesh smiling back. Tricia is the Assistant School Leader (ASL) at Dilip Vihar and Rakesh is ASL at another partner school. Rakesh is also Tricia's husband. Three other small groups have formed around three different values. Each group is given an A2 sheet of paper while paints, pens, stickers, and plasticine are offered for all to use. Divya tells us each to make a group artwork that represents our chosen Student Vision value. Each group has ten minutes. When the task is complete, we explain the

---

<sup>57</sup> During 2019-2020 school year, Clear-Space partnered with four Delhi primary schools and one school in a small village in Uttarakhand. The anomalous Uttarakhand school partnership arose because one of Clear-Space's early corporate funders have a factory in the hills of the state, and they asked Clear-Space to start an education project there in return for money to grow the start-up.

different elements in our collective picture, and share funny anecdotes of how we felt during the process.

We stop for chai; some open their lunch *tiffins* and snack on *roti* or *namkeen*. Today, Raju Bhaiya the office caretaker is busy, so everyone makes their own tea. In the break, Baan and I discuss our visits to the women-led Shaheen Bagh street-occupation, a protest against the new citizenship laws that discriminate against Muslims in India. I say I've been twice in the last 30 days, Baan says he's been five times.

Divya begins the next section with a small lecture on the importance of evaluation. She tells the group that 'we have now fixed the reason why we assess', it is so that 'kids and teachers can recognise where they are in terms of the vision and pathway to growth for the same'. Divya, along with Research Officer, Avi, now introduce the 2050 game. The hosts jumble us up into new groups of six and place a small envelope in front of each group. Divya then asks everyone to close their eyes and begins a group visioning exercise. She asks us to imagine we have gone forward in time by 30 years. She continues: 'It is now 2050 and the world looks very different. Look around you. What do you see? What are the people doing? How are they travelling around? What do the buildings look like? ... After giving everyone a few minutes to fully imagine this new world, Divya asks us to open our eyes and discuss with our group what 2050 will be like. Each group must come up with a collaborative vision. Inside the envelope are cut-out images: a car, a factory, a person, a tree, an eye. Divya explains these can be used along with pens and paints to make an artwork that displays the vision.

As the groups begin their discussions, Divya and Avi each pull out a spreadsheet covered in tiny font. On the left, the six values of the Student Vision are listed, and under each is a description of behaviour that indicates whether a participant involved in the 2050 game is displaying that value. Along the columns that intersect that row, numbers are written, 1-5. For example, one of the questions underneath 'Collaboration' reads, 'Do they listen carefully to others and use encouraging language to build on the ideas of the other?', then, along the row there is space to mark the participant on a scale of 1-5. Divya and Avi are each observing one group and have each chosen one particular person in that group to assess. Divya has chosen to assess Arushi, and Avi has chosen me.

After about ten minutes of discussion, each group is asked to present their vision to the others. Some groups tell imaginative stories about complex earth cooling systems, others explain how hospitals are now surveillance centres for an increasingly authoritarian government, while others provide light relief with tales of dinosaur-alien utopias. After the groups have shared, Divya and Avi reveal the real purpose of the 2050 game. They tell the group that they have designed an observation tool (the Student Vision values spreadsheet) to evaluate participants who are taking part in the 2050 game.

Avi explains that she has been closely observing my behaviour and will now use her findings as an example of how to use the observation tool. She goes on to note how I scored highly on the ‘Creativity’ value questions, for example, I ‘came up with original ideas’ – but scored less well on questions that indicate my ‘Collaboration’ and ‘Empathy’. I didn’t always ‘listen carefully to the ideas of others and build on them’, and I sometimes missed contributions from quieter members of the group because I was loudly engaged in a side-chat. She also pointed out that because I had ‘peer status’, my ideas were accepted more quickly by others in the group.

\*

We now jump ahead a month in time. It is early February 2020, and Divya and Avi have come to the Dilip Vihar school to pilot the 2050 game with the 11-year-olds in Class 5. Divya has asked Arushi to select a group of six children with mixed academic ability and within which there are no strong pre-existing feuds, very close friendships, or any other type of emotional intimacy that will affect the children’s ability to engage in the game as fairly and openly as possible.

She sits with the children on the paved stage in the school courtyard. She once again guides the participants through an eyes-closed imagination exercise where they are asked to envision the world in 2050, this time, she conducts the exercise in Hindi. Arushi, Tricia and I observe from a distance.

The children open their eyes to find the cut-out images laid in front of them, as well as paper and coloured pens. Divya says that the children have 10 minutes to discuss and come up with a collective vision. The children sit in silence. After about 20 seconds, Divya prompts the

groups with questions, ‘Sumit, what did you think of when you closed your eyes?’ Sumit replies, ‘There are flying cars everywhere and everyone is happy’. The other children fidget. Divya praises Sumit’s contribution and asks Anjali what she imagines 2050 to be like. The girl responds and Divya asks other children what they think of the contribution, ‘*Achcha lagta hai*’ [I like it] they mumble – but don’t add anything more. Divya resorts to going around the circle and garnering replies from the children one by one. After a few minutes, she decides to call it a day and close the circle, but first asks Arushi or Tricia if they would like to step in and engage the group.

Arushi steps up onto the stage and plops herself down in the circle. She prompts the children with leading questions to get them thinking on the topic, ‘Do you think there will be food in 2050?’, ‘Will we be sharing the earth with aliens?’ A child’s face lights up, ‘There will be no food in 2050! We will live on air!’, Arushi counters, ‘but, it is impossible for humans to live without food!’ ‘No, didi’, whines a different girl, Aatika, ‘we live on sunshine in 2050, just like the plants do!’. To this, Azaan pricks up, ‘*wo nahin ho sakta hai, plants photosynthesis karte hai*’ [impossible, plants do photosynthesis]. ‘*Haan lekin – 2050 me naya technology ho jayega*’, [Yes but – in 2050 there will be new technology], says another girl, Khushi excitedly. Arushi continues with this line of engagement – asking more direct, provocative questions – and the discussion picks up pace. After another ten minutes the children seem ready to end the exercise, and Arushi closes the circle.

Divya and Avi thank the children and fill in their assessment spreadsheets.

\*

I present the above vignette to suggest that the development of the Student Vision and the 2050 game assessment tool are examples of Divya’s attempt to develop a new method by which she can practice purposed-leadership. Divya’s professional role at Clear-Space is Schools Director, she manages the five School Leaders, of which Arushi is one, and helps ensure their school intervention projects run successfully. At the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year, Clear-Space decided they would no longer provide substitute teachers when the government failed to employ enough teachers to cover each school classroom. This decision meant that Clear-Space no longer had direct access to children by way of teaching, instead – as was the intention – the NGO’s focus was on supporting the already-present government teachers to improve their

teaching practice. Above, we explored how Arushi's desire to mother-coach Suraj and Kasak is in part a response to meet her desire to lead. As a Teach-Them fellow, Arushi had a classroom of 40 girls to inspire, as a School Leader at Clear-Space, she can lead only Suraj and Kasak, and must spend her school hours navigating the micropolitics of government bureaucracy if she hopes to maintain an influence.

Divya, however, is even more starved of opportunities for intimate coaching than her colleague Arushi. Although Clear-Space's official policy is that staff do not teach classes in school, as is clear in the second part of the vignette above, Arushi has a rapport with the school children that Divya lacks. This is nothing to do with Arushi's ability to teach over Divya's, but simply that Arushi spends every day in school and has built personal relationships with the children.

In my view, both Arushi and Divya miss the sense of purposed-leadership they enjoyed through the daily work of classroom teaching during their fellowship. If Arushi explores her ambition by mother-coaching Suraj and Kasak, Divya fulfils hers by developing the Student Vision.

Before January 2020, Divya's arts-based reflection 'Program Circles' were her main professional opportunity to live out her desire to lead. In my vignette above, Divya has begun to use the Program Circles as a testing ground for a wider ambition: to experience the sense of purposed-leadership she feels from seeing her direct influence on children. Divya is no longer part of a school community. The 2050 game is a way she can get back into school and watch children grow.

## **Family and Responsibilisation**

### **Family and purposed-leadership**

I argue that 'family' is an important concept through which Divya imagines herself growing as a purposed-leader. During our interview, Divya told me that she doesn't want to have her own biological children. Like a lot of Teach-Them educationalists I met, she said, with a knowing

smile, ‘I already have kids’.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, Divya emphasises how much she values her own biological family, how she also values people at Clear-Space equal to her biological family, and how important the practice of ‘family’ is to people in India.<sup>59</sup> She said,

In US, or wherever I go, people are very friendly and warm etc, but family? No. It is only there in people in India. People who I work with, whether it’s in corporate or anywhere, that value of family is only there in Indians.

How does Divya’s valuing of family relate to her Student Vision? The values of the Student Vision are those of Teach-Them and Teach-Them’s queen-value is purposed-leadership. Purposed-leadership hinges on the image of a leader who locates a purpose by developing a self-awareness of their feelings. The ideal purposed-leaders must put their own experience of the world first. That is, they must prioritise their own individual experience of the world over narratives told to them by others. But, as we’ve seen in Chapter 1, Teach-Them are perhaps more interested in ensuring fellows align to Teach-Them’s mission than they are in fellows developing a deep awareness of their own emotional experience.

Above, Arushi warns Kasak not to accept her parents’ reality as her own and instead be honest with herself about what she desires. In the same breath, Arushi frames subjectivity as individuated and agential: Kasak is an autonomous subject who must find her ‘little light’. But this is Arushi’s *own* belief, not necessarily Kasak’s, and one that aligns with the image of self that circulates at Teach-Them. It is, like the assumed beliefs of Kasak’s parents, epistemologically rigid: in one *you the individual* have the knowledge to choose what’s best for you, in the other *them the family* are to be followed and respected in their wishes. Somehow, in the affective intensity of Arushi’s desire to lead Kasak out of her confusion, a simplified dichotomy is produced that reduces our potential for more nuanced understanding.

Below, we see that two of Divya’s central values are self-reliance and self-management. Again, we see how it is in moments of affective intensity that Divya grasps onto a simplified image of subjectivity, in this case, the ‘self-managing’ person who only needs coaching, not

---

<sup>58</sup> Many Teach-Them fellows and alumni refer to their children they taught during their fellowship as ‘their kids’.

<sup>59</sup> In one instance, Divya’s biological family and the family of Clear-Space literally overlap: her younger sister is employed in an admin role at in the organisation.



management. To understand Divya's trajectory into this way of thinking, let us look to how she describes her relationship with her father.

'Out all the people in my family,' says Divya, 'I'm closest to my father. Because I also value all the things he has built in us.' On this, I asked Divya which of the six Student Vision values were most present in her family growing up:

Critical Thinking and Grit. Empathy was not prioritised in my family when growing up. As an adult, I grew in empathy in my values, and with my sister Puja [who also works at Clear-Space], we both tried to drive empathy in our family. Also, I was suppressed a lot for having curiosity as a child.

I argue that Divya's experience of her biological family directly informs the kind of family she seeks to build at Clear-Space – and the kind of family she imagines being built via the Student Vision. Key to this image of family is the individualised agent who, although always ready to demand support from their family, operates with a precise self-sufficiency and metrically-efficient self-awareness. In this conception of the ideal family, it is everyone's responsibility to commit to not only knowing their own needs but also to finding efficient methods for articulating those needs to the group. This means that those needs must be translatable into the logic of verbal language. Furthermore, Divya's image of an ideal family member is reflected in the image of the ideal purposed-leader which Teach-Them promotes.

### **Leader not a manager**

In 2019-2020, Divya was Arushi's line manager. Divya was responsible for ensuring Arushi fulfilled her duties as a School Leader. Over the course of the academic year, Divya became frustrated with School Leaders (including Arushi – but not her only) who failed to stick to the plans that were collectively set out in the Objectives and Key Results (OKR) framework that Clear-Space founder Baan introduced in April 2019.<sup>60</sup>

In venting her difficulties with managing Arushi, Divya said:

---

<sup>60</sup> I will explore the OKR organisational evaluation tool in more detail in Chapter 3.

... there are things like HR policies and code of conduct – which are just the way the organisation is run – and as a manager I have to adhere to. I don't think people who are helping you lead should be your managers. I think those people should be two different people. If I want to help you on your leadership, but then I also look at your work in school and say: this is not done, this is not done, that's really conflicting.

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.

Divya wishes Arushi could self-manage so that she, Divya, could be saved from the emotionally uncomfortable business of disciplining a peer. Divya is also perhaps envious of Arushi's role in school, which provides her time to coach Suraj and Kasak, and practice teaching leadership. Divya hosts Program Circles that give her the chance to coach the team through arts-based self-reflection. But this is not enough. She wants to be free of the mundane responsibility of staff management so she can develop her purposed-leadership through coaching.

The problem is, not everyone in the Clear-Space team is able to 'manage themselves', because, when looked at sociologically, the idea of 'managing oneself' is revealed to be a neoliberal fantasy. It is the free-market theorist's desire to reduce an analysis of human behaviour to an accounting of profit and loss, a world where subjects only interact with each other to meet exact and precise needs. As Nandini Gooptu notes, this conception of self is beginning to circulate widely in post-liberalisation India. I quote her again:

The active enterprising citizen does not make claims on the state and is a self-regulated, self-governed and self-disciplined individual, prepared to take responsibility for his or her own well being and for managing risks and vulnerabilities arising from socioeconomic or political sources (Gooptu 2013b:4).

Divya's 'self-managing' subject seems an avatar of Gooptu's 'active enterprising citizen', with the added skill of hyper-self-awareness. For to self-manage, an individual must have free and deep access to their subconscious desires, so that they can always know what they want and

how to ask for it. They must also have purpose, because, as our discussion of the Teach-Them training Centre revealed, it is a sense of purpose that gives under-prepared teaching fellows the confidence to step into the classroom and teach. In this logic, if a person has a strong enough purpose, then they can overcome their vulnerability at asking for help.

So, why then, does Arushi fail to reflect on her weakness and refuse to ask Divya for help? Perhaps because Arushi and Divya have had different experiences of family. Divya's family may not have been as financially secure as those of the Delhi uber-elite with whom she shared a childhood, but she has not had to face real precarity and vulnerability, not in the way of Kasak or Suraj, who come from much lower-income families. Even Arushi, who has indeed gained the confidence in adulthood to find 'her own' life path, did not grow up in a family that offered her much support – financial or emotional. Perhaps Arushi fears being judged as a failure in her role as School Leader, as this would explain why the patronage of the SI seemed important to Arushi. If Divya deems Arushi's work substandard, the latter can defend her position in school by saying that it is only her personal relationship with the SI that keeps a hold over the principal and maintains Clear-Space's partnership with the school. Furthermore, Divya herself admits that 'weakness' was disdained in her family while growing up, and as much as she might have, through careful self-reflection, realised this – it is unlikely she has thrown off a disdain for 'weakness' entirely. As she says, she feels 'closest' to her father for 'all the things he has built in us'.

If asked directly, Divya would admit that one's family background has a huge influence on how supported a person might feel in taking risks. I argue that the reason Divya naively claims that, 'you just have to give people the skills of self-discipline, vulnerability, asking for support', is because in that moment she is gripped by affective intensity. She longs to fulfil her desire for purposed-leadership and be released of the burden of monitoring flawed, ordinary humans. In this moment she flattens human experience, wishes away the inconveniences of family background, wealth, and social status, and anxiously imagines that all her team to have the time, energy, and confidence to pick apart their own subjective 'strengths and weaknesses' with detailed self-reflection. The irony here is in a competitive, market-based society the 'active enterprising citizen' has little time to practice the self-reflection needed to develop into a self-managing subject, regardless of the support an individual might draw from their family or wider social milieu.

### **Shut up and do something!**

*The work I do is what I'm passionate about. Shifting things in education, finding innovative ways to do something. My purpose is believing in the potential of people. It is the government's duty to provide a free and quality education to all citizens of India, and I am a deeply, deeply patriotic person, and I strongly believe in the duties of the state. There's a reason that I'm not moving from India. For me, education is the answer. It is in our constitution that government needs to provide free, accessible, and quality education. Free part is there, access is there, but quality is not there. And the challenge for me is that quality is not expected by people. There is no belief in our institutions. You can sit on your armchair and say: oh, government sucks, but you're not doing anything about it either. You are your country. You say: India is like this, India is like this, you are an Indian! Do something. Stop having intellectual conversations and do something. That used to drive me nuts, people intellectualising the problem. Shut up and do something!*

– Divya, February 2020

In her role as Schools Director, Divya wants to *do something* because it is in *doing* that one gains the role of purposed-leader. Here, leadership is conflated with 'doing', just as it was in the influential Times of India 2007 'Lead India' campaign, which, as Nandini Gooptu quotes, challenges Indians to 'do something' for the development of the country,

Today we've reached a stage where the eyes of the world are on us again. So what are we going to *do*? Are we going to simply shrug our shoulders, blame our infrastructure, our bureaucracy and our political system? Or are we going to roll up our sleeves, get up and actually *do* something about it?' (Times of India campaign quoted in Gooptu 2013b:1-2)

Divya's desire for action links to the growth of 'new managerialism' in education provision tracked by anthropologist Kathleen Hall (2005). As V. Subramanian writes, leaning on Hall,

Debates surrounding education are no longer confined to professionalised communities of academics and practitioners, but now need to engage with collectives of entrepreneurial social actors who needed to see 'action' produce certain kinds of 'effective results'. (V. Subramanian 2018:40)

Divya is keen for all educationalists in her community to learn self-management so that they can better know how their own skills can be channelled into serving the mission of ending education inequity. In this logic, it is through self-management that entrepreneurialism grows. But Divya also recognises that learning to self-manage is not easy: one needs to practice careful self-reflection so as to learn to self-manage, and where is the time for that self-reflection when ‘leaders’ must continually prove their value by ‘doing something’?

Family, and social relations, are also hugely influential on one’s ability to learn to ‘self-manage’, and I argue that much of ‘self-management’ is a way for the middle-class to legitimise their roles in socially-oriented organisations. As David Sancho wrote of middle-class families in Kerala, the ‘image of contemporary youth as self-reliant, self-motivated and highly ambitious’ is now the ‘normative subjectivity’ into which parents attempt to usher their children (Sancho 2015:74). Sancho’s parents want to make it seem that the success of their children arises from their progeny’s self-originating motivation and talent, whereas in fact it is the cultural and social capital of their middle-class-ness which secures their places in colleges and future employment.

Divya herself admits that her family have had a huge influence on who she has become. But her concept of family is – perhaps unsurprisingly considering the elasticity of the term – broad and complex. She at once imagines a family – the family of Clear-Space, at least – to be a group of self-disciplined individuals who assess their needs and request support from each other as necessary. And this image of community seems eerily close to the ruthless individualism which characterises a neoliberalised society where each individual selects their social relationships on a ‘profit and loss’ analysis. Indeed, it is this individualised society which so worried Divya during her studies in the West. As she says above, ‘In US, or wherever I go, people are very friendly and warm etc, but family? No. It is only there in people in India’.

Arushi, too, is motivated to create a sense of family in her professional community – and indeed, my experience of working with her at Dilip Vihar primary school had elements that I would judge as both positive and negative elements of ‘family’. For example, it was collective, and exclusive: we ate our food together, in our team, and shared amongst us freely; the teachers sat in a separate room, and food offering between the groups took a formal, ceremonial quality.

What is interesting to me is that the valuing of ‘family’, whatever exactly it is, can sit alongside the valuing of purposed-leadership. Even those like Arushi who have had painful experiences of family are drawn back into the desire to produce one. Perhaps, then, family becomes a more familiar social structure which helps balance the intensity which seems to arise when faced with the difficulties of fulfilling the desire to practice purposed-leadership.

### **Conclusion: gendered purposed-leadership?**

In this chapter, I display the professional lives of two women educators who are, to differing degrees, restricted in fulfilling their desire to ‘lead’ by the parameters of their own job descriptions. For both, the need to find opportunities to perform as purposed-leaders induces them to reproduce an ideology in which each individual is responsible for their own ‘self-management’. In the process of lecturing her NGO juniors, Arushi builds an image of self-management in which a person must take responsibility for their own fears and insecurities. Suraj and Kasak cannot blame others for their problems, just as Arushi has learnt not to blame her parents or society for the injustice she has suffered. Divya’s frustration with Arushi’s unwillingness to ask for help encourages her to envision the ideal worker as one who has already done the self-reflection needed to have both the self-awareness to know their own limitations, and the self-confidence to admit them.

These narratives of responsabilisation simultaneously empower and entrap the two educators. Arushi has the confidence to lead the school team but relinquishes the tools she needs to practice a more historically and socially nuanced self-reflection that incorporates a gender and caste analysis. Divya’s insistence on staff self-management leaves her more time to work directly with the children through the Student Vision, but concomitantly forecloses her chance to build a deeper relationship with Arushi and further enhance her leadership ‘skills’.

Arushi’s case is especially poignant. What Arushi needs is support in linking her childhood experiences of gender inequality and casteism to her fear of asking for help – but this type of self-reflection is not encouraged at the Teach-Them Centre, where the aim is to prepare fellows to commit to the IERM by fuelling their self-confidence, not to ask difficult questions about socio-political realities. Arushi is promised that her commitment to this education movement will provide her a community to support her self-reflection, and therefore self-actualisation –

but in the daily realities of start-up NGOs, space for this practice evaporates. Arushi's story is an instance of my central conclusion: that the discourse of purposed-leadership leaves Teach-Them educators in relations of cruel optimism: her space for self-reflection reduces as per her commitment to the mission of education reform.

And yet there are moments in Arushi's work life where the restricting discourse of 'autonomous' selfhood is blown away by the insistent relationality of human interaction. Her strategizing with the Principal and School Inspector might not align with the ideal vision of a purposed-leaders' actions always displaying some noble, inner self – but these are complex, emotional, affective entanglements which embed Arushi into the process of delivering education through school. It is perhaps the intensity of such entanglements which encourages both Arushi and Divya to return to the concept and practice of *family*. A desire for family, then, is perhaps something that is produced within the tension between the self-actualisation promised by leadership, and the sense of meaning found in day-to-day interactions of working in schools and education NGOs.

Furthermore, these women – like the men who populate Chapters 3 and 4 – are circumscribed in their practice of purposed-leadership and desire for family by their gendered subjectivity. When, in contemporary India, cultural archetypes of the nurturing, ever-present domestic mother circulate alongside contrasting images of the ideal man as a distanced, authoritative, managerial father, it is perhaps no surprise that Arushi and Divya, as two women, remain closer to the school than two male start-up founders, Baan and Prashant, who we meet below.

In the next chapter, we discover an educationalist whose professional journey seems a more 'masculine' response to the desire to practice purposed-leadership produced during the Teach-Them fellowship. Baan – the protagonist of Chapter 3 – is further away from the site of interaction, the school, where education interventions happen. As we move further away from the site of interaction, we see the anxiety of educators increase. And the more anxiety educators feel around their sense of purpose and sense of self, the more extreme their moments of affective intensity, and the more extreme the collateral damage that can occur.

## *Chapter 3.*

# *Life as a Social Entrepreneur of Education in Delhi*

\*

## **Introduction to Chapter 3**

### **Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter spotlights one Teach-Them alumnus whose lifeworld seems to have been intensely influenced by the values and epistemology of Teach-Them and the education development sector around it. His name is Baan, and he is the founder of the education NGO Clear-Space.

Baan's sense of self has become deeply entangled with the identity of his start-up NGO, and I argue that this is because he has devoted himself so completely to valuing purposed-leadership. Baan uses a quantitative lens to assess his ethical value; he does this because he operates in an education development sector informed by a positivist ontology that posits selves as 'autonomous' subjects. Baan is frustrated because he feels criticised by peers and underappreciated by colleagues; this frustration is a result of the two events above. Baan has elided his sense of self with the identity of his NGO, and this elision means he reads any judgement of his work as a judgement of himself, and vice versa. Furthermore, Baan is unable to account for why he is being judged, because according to the quantitative measuring of his behaviour, he seems to be doing many actions needed to be seen as a valuable member of the IERM. To escape his frustration and anxiety, Baan seeks to further devote himself to purposed-leadership. Baan's anxiety intensifies his desire for the self-actualisation which has been promised by Teach-Them if he commits to the IERM, but the actions he takes to further his self-actualisation exacerbates the risk of losing the very community he needs to feel secure. In this way, Baan's desiring purposed-leadership leads him into a relation of *cruel optimism*.



### **Baan's method for achieving purposed-leadership**

Baan approaches the problem of practising purposed-leadership differently to Arushi and Divya. He is perhaps influenced by a more masculine archetype of success, one more aligned with Mattison Mines' theory of the South Asian 'big man' (Mines and Gourishankar 1990), in which a strong sense of self is produced by becoming the human avatar for an important socio-religious organisation.

This route to purposed-leadership, I argue, has a more transcendental colour in contradistinction to the relative immanence of Arushi and Divya's. Whereas Arushi and Divya continue to work more directly with children – despite the limits of their job descriptions – Baan is happier as manager, organiser, and strategist. As I noted in the introduction, the chapters of the thesis shift teleologically from immanence to transcendence as I explore the lifeworlds of my entrepreneurial educationists. If Arushi's role in school brings her closest to 'on-the-ground' immanence, and Divya's management of the school teams allows her at least some time at the site of intervention, then Baan's role as CEO of Clear-Space leaves him scant opportunity to see the children learning, and therefore one further step removed.

### **The value of affective research**

In this chapter, I select moments in which Baan's emotion is most clearly visible. I use these moments as evidence that Baan's attempt to practice purposed-leadership cause him to feel misunderstood, critiqued, and undervalued. I label these as moments of 'affective intensity' because I want to centralise how affect is so difficult to quantify, how Baan is using the wrong tools to measure his value, and how his appraisals leave him bitter and with low self-esteem.

One point on methodology. Most of Baan's moments of affective intensity displayed below occur within introspective arts-based workshops hosted by both myself and other professional facilitators. I chose to host such reflection spaces to generate ethnographic data in a space that is familiar to the Teach-Them community. I wanted to generate non-quantitative, affective data that helps us learn about ourselves without resorting to questionnaires or feedback forms –

which are the very methods Baan has asked his staff to use in their appraisal of themselves and the organisation. As we see Baan beginning to recognise in this chapter, these methods have failed at Clear-Space. I want to show how it is possible to make empirical observations on human behaviour through thick description and ethnographic analysis which could help education organisations better understand those who work there.

### **Baan's biography in brief**

Baan is in his early thirties. He comes from a Brahmin family and was born and raised in a village in West Bengal. At some point during his twenties he decided to remove his *janeu* – a thread worn by Brahmin males to mark their passage from childhood to adulthood. In urban English-speaking circles, the *janeu* is increasingly taken to be a political symbol – and its removal practised as a rejection of caste hierarchy (Mitra 2019).

Once, in a sharing circle, Baan explained how his dream, before joining the Teach-Them movement, was to become a professor of physics in a quiet European town. He also spoke of his difficult relationship with his father, and how his father at one point refused to get medical treatment to protest Baan's life choices. His father was disappointed that Baan had not used his education to seek out employment that pays better than running a non-profit education NGO.

The above summary of Baan's life might feel different to how I presented that of Arushi and Divya in Chapter 2. This is because the way I got to know Baan was different to how I got to know other interlocutors in the field. Baan and I met *before* I began my PhD fieldwork – and during fieldwork I forgot to take the time to ask Baan more directly about his early childhood experiences. In lieu of accumulated data from the field, I recently emailed Baan and asked him for a bit more information about his early life. Here, I include the verbatim transcription of his reply:

- I grew up in a joint family with around 10 other people and went to a Christian missionary school in Asansol, which was a big deal because most of my friends I grew up with went to the government school near my colony
- I had a very strong relationship with my grandfather till he passed away when I was 13, I am also very close to my Uncle who is my father's youngest brother

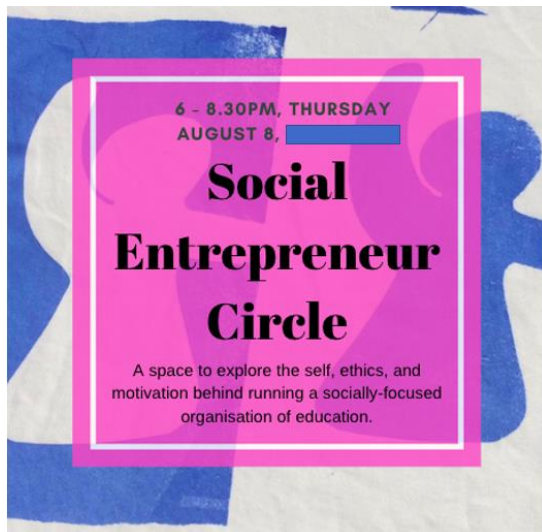
- I grew up with the single idea of being successful which meant having money and fame and that has somewhere influenced some of my key decisions and continue to do some - so I have had a complex relationship with money especially after I started fundraising
- I studied engineering before joining Teach-Them and then chose Teach-Them over a campus job offer from Tata Group
- Some of the key influencers in my life w/r/t decision making has been (a) will I be able to support my values through this work/decision (b) will I be able to support myself and be independent (c) will I be able to support my family when they need me (d) do I have the courage to do this and (e) do I have the skills to pull this off – so yeah a bunch of financial and then value-driven questions

The casual tone of Baan's email above is indicative of the way he freely communicates about his life choices and professional path. As we see below, it is because of Baan's open and questioning disposition that we can learn so much of how it feels to live as a social entrepreneur of education in contemporary Delhi.

## **Baan: An Ethnographic Analysis (a)**

### **Prologue: All work and no play makes Baan a good boy?**

When I began my fieldwork, I had big dreams: I was going to understand social entrepreneurs of education in Delhi by becoming a social entrepreneur myself. I would host a series of weekend workshops where 20 entrepreneurs would come together to discuss their experiences and learn to be more critical of themselves and their work. When I tentatively shared this plan with one social entrepreneur, she told me I had my work cut out. Entrepreneurs are fickle and time poor; I would have to sell my workshops as something that would really help their enterprise flourish. A month later I'd dropped the 'weekend' part and settled on five day-long sessions over the year to come; three months later, I'd settled on hosting a suite of two-and-a-half-hour evening workshops once every three weeks, hoping to host about 15 people at a time. I recruited like hell for the first session and still only attracted five attendees.



*Flyer for the first Social Entrepreneur Circle*

\*

### **Vignette A: The Social Entrepreneur Circle**

Baan was the first to accept the invitation to join my inaugural Social Entrepreneur Circle (SEC). The theme was: ‘Negotiating the line between personal/professional’. The workshops ran as follows: I would write the theme-statement on a whiteboard and then make a collective mind map with the participants. Next, entrepreneurs would form groups of 2-3 based on a theme they found interesting from the whiteboard. I then led a drama warm-up exercise before asking each group to make a 1–2-minute play based on the theme. I would give explicit restrictions to the participants to help them produce clearer theatre, e.g., ‘tell the story in five freeze frames, with no words or movement’. After the drama section, the whole group would sit for about an hour and discuss that week’s theme, based on their experiences of both making the mind map and the theatre sketch.

As I called out contributions for the very first SEC, my pen flew across the board as words and questions began to crowd the slippery plane; my claw ached as I scribbled with melting legibility. Of the array of ideas squeezed onto the board, Baan chose this question for his theme:

‘What *is* a fulfilling life?’

Baan was joined by two others and the three of them made a theatre sketch. After the embarrassment and giggles that followed the neat little five-part mime, Baan commented on what he had discovered through the process:

... during the acting and trying to find what fulfilment looks like, none of it was to do with work. Subconsciously perhaps my mind was telling me that there is not enough of these other things in my life, only work.<sup>61</sup>

‘Not enough other things in my life, only work.’ As we see throughout the chapter, Baan consciously elides his own identity with that of the organisation he runs. Here, Baan wonders if his dedication to his work is causing him stress; it is a moment where he seems to realise that a relentless pursuit of purposed-leadership might not necessarily lead to the holistic calm of self-actualisation.

In this chapter I argue that it is Baan’s Teach-Them-inflected sense of self and desire for purposed-leadership that leaves him unable to take time off – because to take time off would reduce his value as a person in the eyes of his friends and Teach-Them family. I argue that Baan has developed this sense of self because his Teach-Them fellowship taught him that if he dedicated himself to Teach-Them’s mission then he would always be part of a ‘family’ and community that offered him emotional support. But Baan is beginning to see the gap between the ideal and real. In the following pages, we see his anger and sadness at not receiving what he was promised. And we also see that – despite his reflection that he might need other things in life besides work – his response to feeling isolated and uncared for is to redouble his efforts to embody purposed-leadership.

---

<sup>61</sup> To reflect on Baan’s self-exploration and analysis, I later asked myself the same question: ‘What is a fulfilling life?’ In my notes I wrote:

When I think of a fulfilling life, I think of being a writer.  
When I think of a fulfilling day, I think of games and climbing up riverbeds full of boulders.

It seems, then, that I faced the same micro/macro predicament as Baan.

### Vignette B: The ‘Compassionate Systems’ workshop<sup>62</sup>

It is the end of July in Delhi. The stickiness of the monsoon rains have arrived, but not yet the rain. The anthropologist wolfs down a *dosa* in a south Indian restaurant, sweating onto the notebook he is furiously trying to fill. He skids out on his whining scooter, carves through the shady lanes of south-west Delhi, then rushes up three flights of stairs to the new offices of the NGO that Baan leads with his co-founder, Mukesh.<sup>63</sup> The office premises are located in part of a home owned by Divya’s extended family; they are shared with another Teach-Them-alumni social enterprise who teach kids soccer.

Divya – the drive behind Clear-Space’s Student Vision – is also responsible for organising the NGO’s quarterly all-team meetings. These meetings are more like office-based retreats for the school-based teams, in which the aim is to build organisational solidarity, alignment, and a sense of togetherness. The quarterly workshops are called Program Circles, a name of signature opacity that reveals its genealogy more than its content: many practices at Clear-Space have been duplicated from Teach-Them. Divya usually runs the Circles herself, but this time she has hired a man connected to Teach-Them in a similar way as the anthropologist: he has gained the trust of the community through a romantic relationship with an active and popular Teach-Them alumna.

Iqbal, the facilitator, has trained with Systems Thinker guru Peter Senge and now works under a new project of Senge’s called Compassionate Systems.<sup>64</sup> Iqbal is a good facilitator, but it is his association with Senge on which he can trade when looking for work amongst Teach-Them-alumni led NGOs, where many of the founders and staff have been trained in Systems Thinking.

The Compassionate Systems workshop that Iqbal has designed for Clear-Space links to the burgeoning social-emotional learning discourse that circulated amongst many Delhi education

---

<sup>62</sup> In this vignette I slip between narrating from the third person to the first person. It may be confusing, but I feel it helps represent my own subjective experience of doing ethnography. There are many disorienting experiences of doing fieldwork, and sometimes I would see myself in a room, in my mind’s eye, almost like an out-of-body experience. My narration here attempts to tap into this ‘uncanny’.

<sup>63</sup> As this vignette reveals, Baan has a complex relationship with his co-founder Mukesh. Ethnographically I do not foreground Mukesh in this thesis, mainly because Mukesh, with a wife and two kids, does not seem to desire purposed-leadership as much as Baan, and intractably, does not inhabit the role of ‘entrepreneur’ as Baan does.

<sup>64</sup> For Senge’s most famous work, and especially influential in the Teach-Them community, see *The Fifth Discipline* (1990).

NGOs during my fieldwork. The activities in Iqbal's workshop are not too different to those Divya herself designs for Program Circles, which mainly involve mobilising the arts and creative expression as a route to introspection and self-questioning.

\*

It is now half-way through the first day of Iqbal's workshop. The group have just completed a theatre exercise in which everyone dramatised a three-part freeze-frame story depicting how they currently feel in their professional role. As we gather in a circle on the crowded office floor, Iqbal asks the group to reflect on the activity and share their experience with the rest of the team. Baan has been uncharacteristically surly and disengaged throughout the morning. He glowers through his colleagues' reflections and then begins a meandering tirade that ends with the words:

I just want it to work. I want to reach 50,000 schools and I'll do whatever we need to get there.

The frustration behind Baan's ambition silences the room more than his words. The team-members know of this goal, but considering most can do little about how quickly Clear-Space expands as an organisation, the vision of 50,000 schools isn't particularly relevant to them. Baan's above comment is a non-sequitur; Iqbal asked how the exercise made him feel and Baan soliloquises a mantra on his dedication to purposed-leadership. Recognising Baan's unhelpful mood, Arushi and Devika try to engage with Baan's comment, but the discussion disappears off to a place that does not aid the flow of Iqbal's workshop, and he wisely calls a break for lunch.

It's now 4pm, and Baan is doodling in his 6-rupee exercise book. Most pages are covered in handwritten Bengali. He tells the anthropologist that he writes in his mother tongue so no-one can read what he's writing, he later confesses that he was copying out Bengali poems he remembers from childhood; there's a poem for every feeling, he explains. With this prompt, I ask how he's feeling:

There must be a simpler way. I hate this session. I didn't ask Iqbal to come here.

Iqbal pairs me up with Baan for the next exercise where we use the Systems Thinking ‘Iceberg Model’ to work through a problem we face at work and deepen our understanding of it by exploring its social and cultural context. Both Baan and I have done the exercise in other workshops and instead spend most of the time chatting. Baan’s despairing tone continues as he speaks of his travails as a founder. He recently sent out a survey to his employees asking how they would rate their salary as compared to the industry standard. The majority replied saying they were being paid below par. ‘Not true’, explains Baan.

They’re getting paid more than all other education start-ups I know, and even the same as Teach-Them. The problem is, they’re comparing their salaries to corporates. There’s only one person in our organisation who gets paid below the industry standard, and that person is me.

Baan explains how he runs a rota system for gratitude emails, the system ensures that he sends a ‘thank you’ message to each employee once every 14 days. The survey also asked employees if they felt supported in their career progression, and the majority said, ‘only partly’.

But they don’t realise if I go for a coffee with them, one-on-one, and talk about where they’re going in life and how to get there ... they just think, that’s Baan chatting to me, that’s not Clear-Space.

I ask Baan about his relationship with Mukesh, his co-founder.

B: When I started this organisation, I thought I was a 5 and Mukesh was a 7

Me: On what scale?

B: Oh, just quality of person, experience. Mukesh is ten years older, I felt I was privileged to be working with him, I decided I needed to be 5 + 3, I needed to be an 8.

\*

It’s Day 2 of the workshop. Iqbal was finding it difficult to host the exercises in the smaller rooms of my office and so the second day of the workshop occurs at the Teach-Them office in another part of town.



10am. Iqbal lays out a circle of papers with emotions written on them. He is creating a representation of Plutchik's 'wheel of emotions'.<sup>65</sup> The anthropologist, fascinated with Baan's behaviour, sits crossed-legged next to him. Iqbal walks past Baan and drops the word 'Joy' in front of him. Baan gazes at the sheet absently and then comments, mostly to himself:

Oh look, I'm sitting in front of something I don't feel any of right now

Baan's mood has clearly not improved. Iqbal asks us to move around, read the emotions, then stand next to the one we feel most accurately displays our latent emotion in life at present. Joy, Trust and Fear are the most popular options, in that order. Baan stands back from the circle, but clearly in the vicinity of Sadness and Disgust. When Iqbal asks Baan to comment on his position, Baan declines.

The next exercise begins with Iqbal explaining the concept of 'generative social fields' (Boell and Senge 2016), how the atmosphere we create around us – our emotions and energy – directly influence not just the behaviour and emotions of those around us, but their capacity to feel and think. Iqbal has planned this session in advance, but its relevance to how Baan's mood is disrupting the collective learning space is mirrored in the furtive glances shared by senior members of the team.

As part of the exercise, Iqbal asks us all to think of one person in our life with which we want to seek a deeper connection. I look to Baan to see who he chooses, perhaps secretly hoping it is me. Baan says he can't think of anyone. Instead, he replies,

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

3pm. The penultimate session of the day. Continuing the theme of 'social fields', Iqbal asks everyone to split into groups of three and take turns sharing moments in life when they had a strong sense that some kind of generative social field was at play. That is, a time where the collective energy of the people present was conducive to a state of openness, joy, creativity,

---

<sup>65</sup> For a website where you can explore Plutchik's wheel of emotions, see <https://www.6seconds.org/2020/08/11/plutchik-wheel-emotions/>

and oneness between those people and the environment around them. One woman speaks of her time in a hilly forest, where, as her friends gathered mushrooms, she sat in a tree and meditated. This experience, she said, gave her an incredible sense of calm, hope and collectivity. Then it's Baan's turn, and as per his mood, he decides to tell a different story.

He speaks of a retreat he organised for the Clear-Space team about two years previous. After a long day of planning and strategizing, some of the team excitedly clambered up to the roof of the hostel where they were staying. It was winter in Rajasthan, and they decided to cook dinner and watch the sunset. Baan became angry. This was not a holiday; they were all on the retreat to work for Clear-Space, not for fun. After delivering a scathing rant, Baan disappeared back into the dorm room. Two colleagues went to console him, and he explained how much he wanted Clear-Space to grow and how he couldn't understand why others weren't as committed. As he spoke, his team comforted him. Mukesh, his co-founder, asked him what things he did to look after himself and get away from work: when did he take a break? Baan said almost never. Mukesh then insisted that Baan was to come over every Sunday for a big family dinner and reminded Baan how important it was to take real breaks.

### **Using affective intensity to understand purposed-leadership**

... when theories have dared to provide even a tentative account of affect, they have sometimes been viewed as naïvely or romantically wandering too far out into the groundlessness of a world's or a body's myriad inter-implications, letting themselves get lost in an overabundance of swarming, sliding differences: chasing tiny firefly intensities that flicker faintly in the night, registering those resonances that vibrate, subtle to seismic, under the flat wash of broad daylight, dramatizing (indeed, for the unconvinced, over-dramatizing) what so often passes beneath mention.

Gregg and Seigworth (2010:4)

Baan is the co-founder of Clear-Space, and the de facto leader of the organisation. I choose to display Baan's behaviour in Iqbal's workshop because it reveals the emotional and psychological strain of living up to purposed-leadership. The vignette shows moments of affective intensity in which the pressure to perform purposed-leadership collides with the isolation and resentment which results from Baan taking purposed-leadership too seriously.

*First moment of affective intensity.* At the end of the drama exercise, Iqbal asks the whole group to share experiences, and Baan kills the reflection with his proclamation: ‘I just want it to work. I want to reach 50,000 schools and I’ll do whatever we need to get there.’ His comment reveals his disconnection from the other members of his team; they have been enjoying the drama exercise, he has been lost in his own thoughts. We learn later that Baan is disappointed in how his team have reviewed the NGO in the satisfaction survey: despite his efforts to provide good leadership to his team, they don’t feel he is invested enough in their career progression. Baan needs comfort and support from his team, and his outburst at the beginning of this two-day workshop on Compassionate Systems is a cry for help. He is unable to see the value of Iqbal’s dramatic reflection exercise and becomes bitter that others are happy to engage in it. How can these colleagues be so free and easy when they are failing to provide the data Baan needs to apply for more funding, funding that will allow Clear-Space to grow and reach 50,000 schools? Ironically, it is perhaps the bodily focus of the drama exercise that has brought Baan’s emotions to the surface in a way that allows him to display his pain. But Iqbal is not running the session as a therapy space for Baan. If he was, he might use Baan’s outburst as an expression of emotion that the CEO can then reflect on. Instead, Iqbal’s priority is to the needs of the wider group, and so he closes the session and denies Baan space for deeper self-reflection.

*Second moment of affective intensity.* Late in the afternoon of Day 1, Baan avoids engagement with the workshop by copying poetry in his notebook. He tells me about his disappointment at the survey, and his frustration that his team don’t read his informal coffee shop chats as acts of leadership and professional guidance. Baan believes café conversations and receiving gratitude emails should be experienced as professional development because he assumes his staff see him the same way he sees himself, as someone who has elided their sense of self with their professional purpose. Or, to put it in his own words, as ‘100% Clear-Space’.

Baan has developed a pragmatic and rational response to the practice of purposed-leadership because Teach-Them have convinced him that being a purposed-leader ensures self-actualisation. For Baan, the fact that he sends gratitude emails like clockwork – every 14 days – shouldn’t decrease the emotive power of the emails. Ironically, Baan’s attempt to depressurise professional reviews by hosting conversations in a laid-back cafe environment has disguised the process too well: staff haven’t even realised these meetings count as part of their professional work.

Through Teach-Them Baan has learnt to value others based on their dedication to purposed-leadership, on their dedication to the movement. He wants to be read by his staff like Teach-Them have suggested he will be read: as a diligent leader who will be loved because he never wavers from the cause. But not all of Baan's staff share his subjectification. Some – especially the junior ones like Suraj and Kasak – have not completed a Teach-Them fellowship and are unaware of this person-as-profession selfhood.

Baan has chosen to review himself quantitatively. He has set a questionnaire that asks staff to rate how well they feel Clear-Space supports them in career progression, and staff must answer in quantitative language (not at all, only partly, fairly well, mostly, completely) – or perhaps on a scale of 1-5.<sup>66</sup> Baan's staff must translate their affective experience of being supported into the numbers and amounts of quantitative positivism. But because his staff have not adopted the value of purposed-leadership as well as Baan, they don't account for times Baan meets them outside of work as professional development: they see that as Baan the person, the friend, the human – not Baan the boss, the leader, the CEO.

*Third moment of affective intensity.* When Iqbal asks us all to sit next to an emotion that dominates our current life state, Baan honestly selects Anger and Disgust. He is angry with his colleagues and disgusted with the education development world which is so difficult to navigate. But to be so honest and open about his emotions while on public display as an NGO founder goes against the practice of purposed-leadership. Baan is in a catch-22: he has been invited by Iqbal to explore and share his feelings, but he has been subjectified by Teach-Them to ensure he puts the mission of Teach-Them first. He knows that his honesty might disrupt the success of his organisation: it might cause his team to lose faith in him if they see him as unable to control his feelings in this professional realm. And so the affective intensity increases: Baan must express himself and also not express himself, and this squeeze catalyses his anger into rage.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Measuring oneself in numbers seems a common feature of contemporary Delhi's entrepreneurial subjects. Lilly Irani notes that her interlocutors at DevDesign would half-jokingly rate themselves on a 'free-will' meter to see how 'authentic' they were being. One individual wants to be rating high on the free-will meter but accepts that he's 'only coming in a five right now' (Irani 2019:91).

<sup>67</sup> It has been pointed out to me that this is a good example of what Erving Goffman would call a 'double bind'. Thanks to my brother Ed for that one.

*Fourth moment of affective intensity.* The peak of Baan's performative realisation of purposed-leadership arrives when he is asked by Iqbal to think of someone with whom he seeks a deeper connection. For Baan, the question is a provocation to rearticulate how deeply he has been misunderstood, he replies: 'My life is 100% Clear-Space. There is no, 10% friends, 20% family, 70% Clear-Space.' Baan's avoidance of the question reveals his isolation: he is feeling so undervalued by his team that he can't step out of that pain to think about who amongst all his friends and family he wants to be closer to. Baan's vulnerability here suggests that he is also feeling unsupported by his wider group of Teach-Them alumni friends – and indeed, during one of my Social Entrepreneur Circles, Baan revealed how the Teach-Them method of friendship can be to focus more on lauding and praising a fellow alumni's work than it is in really connecting with the other's emotional experience. Baan's reconfiguration of Iqbal's question illuminates how much Baan's sense of self is linked to his role as leader of the Teach-Them movement: he has been taught that he will be valued for his dedication to purposed-leadership and presents himself as valuable by reminding his audience of how much he has wrapped up his identity in that of his NGO.

Baan's response also reminds us of the quantitative metrics that epistemologically ground the lifeworld of Teach-Them: he uses a pie-chart metaphor (70%, 20%, 10%) to represent his work-life balance. This is the language Baan has taught his teammates to use in their own self-assessment through the Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) schema which he introduced to Clear-Space. Baan's introduction of OKRs into Clear-Space provides a helpful window through which we can further explore Baan's habit of conflating self-reflection, self-assessment, and self-accounting. In the following 'interlude', we explore the relationship between Baan's desire for data regarding the success of school interventions with his positing of a measurable self – or, as I term it – quantitative personhood.

# Ethnographic Interlude: Desiring Data, Quantitative Personhood

## Vignette C: Baan's desperation for data, and the logic of expansion

It is mid-October 2019. The aching heat has crept out of the gates of the city, but just as people begin to breathe, the pollution rises – it will peak at the month's end with Diwali, and just as the schools close to commemorate Ram, *chutti* oblation extends by a few days to venerate a new god: the petrol engine. The team, unhindered by tidings of future coughs, huddle inside the same small office room where the first day of Iqbal's Compassionate Systems training took place. All the school teams have been called to present data that will show how well they have achieved the Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) that they set at the beginning of the quarter (July 2019).

In a bid to collect useful data and boost staff productivity, Baan has brought a quantitatively-tinted mode of self-appraisal into the heart of his organisation. Each week, Clear-Space employees must fill in their Objectives and Key Results (OKR) report. OKRs were developed by venture capitalist John Doerr to help businesses – especially start-ups – streamline their internal monitoring and evaluation (Doerr 2018). The Clear-Space school teams must set goals for themselves using percentage-based sentences. As their main work is in teacher development, one Key Result might read: '80% of teachers will identify their teaching strengths, and then use those strengths in 100% of their lessons'. But OKRs are also used for self-assessment. For example, as Community Aggregator, one of Suraj's KRs might read: 'I will call 100% of parents of absent children and visit 50% of these parents at home'.

Baan and Divya sit attentive and cross-legged as the teams take turns to report on their work from the previous quarter. In July 2019, Mukesh, Baan's co-founder, took over as the School Leader for Ekant Nagri Boys School, Delhi, in which it was Clear-Space's first year of intervention. Mukesh has come up with an algorithm that produces a numerical figure to represent how well his team has met their OKRs. His team consists of solely of himself, and Tricia's husband, Rakesh. The figure is 0.329, which, Mukesh explains, means his team has been about 33% successful. Komal, who recently re-joined the organisation after a break to do

an MA in Education at Harvard, is displaying data from the second quarter of her intervention at Prem Vihar school. She does not present photos of children or an algorithmic figure of achievement but talks Baan and Divya through how she has been trying to engage the teachers, and the continuing success of Clear-Space's partnership with a gardening charity who oversees the development of a vegetable patch in the grounds of the school. Finally, it is Arushi and Tricia's turn; they bumble through an explanation similar to Komal's; eyes get tired and drift to their mobile phones.

Baan is not impressed. He begins to articulate his disappointment:

There is so little data in these presentations. I'm happy to sit with each team for as long as it takes to work out how you'll collect data. Without data, stories are just stories. Getting data is better than anecdotes, it helps us build quicker.

Baan is not partisan in his criticism; it is directed to his co-founder Mukesh as much as the other school teams. He adjourns the meeting and leaves the room. I follow Tricia and Rakesh to the metro stop and ask how they're feeling. Tricia is not surprised by Baan's actions and attitude; he is prone to dramatic outbursts; he says he wants data in one form today and a different form tomorrow; and he doesn't know what he wants. I agree with Tricia on her last point, Baan doesn't seem clear on exactly what kind of 'data' he needs. I return to the office to collect my moped, then phone Baan and invite him to dinner. We eat pizza and discuss life and work; we walk in the plaza and Baan implores me to have some empathy for his position and be a little more critical of my school-team buddy, Arushi. I ask Baan if I should drop him home on my moped, and he asks for a lift to a market across town where he can collect supplies for next week's Diwali office party.

\*

It is unremarkable that Baan wants to collect quantitative data concerning the success of Clear-Space's school intervention program. Monitoring and evaluation is a ubiquitous feature of NGOs across India, and common in the Indian Education Reform Movement (see Ball 2016a). That funders require reports from the NGOs is a mundane fact of contemporary privatised social work. Furthermore, it is no surprise that those working 'on the ground', the school-based Clear-Space staff, are less bothered by the collection of this data than the management team

who sit in the office. This is for two reasons: one, because it is part of Baan and Divya's job to ensure the organisation has funds to continue operating, and two, more subtly, because those working directly with children see the 'data' unfold before them every time they arrive at work. The school staff rely on affective experience to value the impact of their work. The photos and anecdotes that act as reports from school to office appear good enough to the school teams because when they see a photo, say, of eight-year-old Khushi completing multiplication for the very first time, they are reminded of the emotional memory that accompanied that event in situ, and feel convinced that their intervention in the school is valuable. Baan, however, is rarely in school. He writes grants, attends conferences, delivers funding pitches, and seeks out corporate and NGO partnerships: when he sees a photo of a child's mathematical progress, he has no emotional memory of the child to give it meaning – and knows that a potential funder won't have either.

But if photos and anecdotes are not enough, what makes numerical quantitative data more valuable? It is not just that metrics are the language of funders who are 'outcomes-focused and results oriented' (Ball 2016a:588). It is also that Baan himself is 'more convinced' by numerical data than stories. Baan's own rationale for this hierarchy of value, as he announces above, is that it 'helps us build quicker'. What I want to argue is that the more Baan invests in the value of purposed-leadership, the more he needs quantitative (read: objective) data to prove to himself that he *as a person* has value. The more Baan builds a narrative of self in which there is no distinction between Baan the person and Baan the founder (i.e. a narrative of purposed-leadership) the more Baan desires supposedly objective proof that his own existence is worth investing in. Positivism is so alluring because it promises truth, and Baan is desperate to shore up his self-esteem. Baan wants numbers to tell him that his NGO education interventions are working because that way he has objective evidence that he is spending his time in a meaningful way. Below, we continue with Baan as he negotiates the ethics of becoming a successful social entrepreneur.



# Becoming a ‘devil’ of the education space

## Introduction to the ‘devil’ vignettes

In the following vignettes, we see how the quantitative metrics Baan uses to analyse professional progress inform the language he uses to conceptualise his development as an *ethical* being. We have already seen him present himself as 100% Clear-Space, but here he attempts to quantify the level of his discursive political commitments through similar percentage-based, numerical means. And as we see, Baan’s use of metrics to assess ethics and self-worth only exacerbates his loneliness and anger.

The first vignette displays Baan’s fear of social ostracization, his worry that if his peers in the education movement judge his behaviour too sharply, then he will lose them as both friends and work partners. The second vignette shows how Baan’s fear draws him to a narrative in which he will be the antihero of his movement. Angry at feeling undervalued, he defiantly rejects immanent ethics in favour of the purported transcendence of teleological utilitarianism. The third vignette reveals Baan at his most honest and vulnerable, as a man mis-sold a dream by Teach-Them, yet who still clings to the value of purposed-leadership as route to self-actualisation.

**Vignette D: The faux-pas of capitalist language**

Insipid white tube lamps  
bathe a group of humans

sat crossed-legged

sweating and  
saving the  
world

68

\*

We join Baan at the second Social Entrepreneur Circle, which this time, like each time, is hosted by the anthropologist at the Teach-Them Delhi office. Baan and the group are discussing the short drama sketches they have just made, this time on the theme ‘Unpacking the term Underprivileged’. Both skits have displayed a child demonstrating the resilience they have learned due to their low-income upbringing. The entrepreneurs have critiqued the term ‘underprivileged’, arguing that it demeans those who are labelled it. One group showed a girl before school failing to find an empty bathroom where she could wash her menstrual cloth, then showing resilience by going to school and smiling through her discomfort; the other showed a teenage boy being gracious to the endless guests who continued to fill his small home. This time Baan and I are joined with a new suite of entrepreneurs: Govind, the head of Wider Community, an NGO that induces young people into social service; Deepika, who is about to launch her own education social enterprise; and Vikram, who runs a social enterprise that teaches ultimate frisbee to children.

---

<sup>68</sup> Poem I wrote during write-up as I tried to reinhabit the texture of the Social Entrepreneur Circle

Baan and Govind are friends and know each other quite well. They are listening to Vikram explain how he finds it more difficult to teach the children in high-end private schools than the children from low-income schools, like the one he taught in during his Teach-Them fellowship. Baan steps in:

Baan: The best way to sharpen a product is to try it out in a high-end private school, and those kids will test it to the limit.

Govind: *[a shadow crosses his face]* ... but you end up creating a market then ... you end up becoming a producer ... versus becoming an actor in the community.

Neither Baan nor Govind are surprised to enter this debate. Govind's organisation, Wider Community, are known for proudly rejecting funding that comes with neoliberal caveats for them to 'scale' their work to create a larger 'impact'. Baan and his organisation Clear-Space are known for their ability to secure lucrative partnerships with corporate sponsors and pay 'above-industry-standard' salaries to the 30 or so staff they employ.<sup>69</sup> The conversation moves on, and it is not until the closing reflections that we learn how sharply Baan's been affected by Govind's critique of his capitalist language:

Baan: I'm always scared, in circles like this, that I'm saying the right word ... is this a socialist word? What is the right word? What is the right way to say it? I feel like just one step here might suddenly ostracise me from others in the room ... [but I think] I'm doing *fairly* well ... whatever money can normally be raised in five years, I will raise it *this year*. So, you guys can go just fuck off, I don't care ... And it's beautiful, my reason to say fuck off is because I've raised more money!'

Full of pain, joy, triumph, bitterness, Baan's closing speech is an ideal specimen of affective intensity. He is afraid, and then covers his fear in anger. He is afraid that his capitalist politics will 'ostracise' him from his friends and fellow educators. And again, this is because he assumes others will see him within the framework that he sees himself: as 100% Clear-Space, and nothing more. Neither Govind nor I have completed a Teach-Them fellowship and so neither of us have been subjected to the discourse of purposed-leadership in the same way. But

---

<sup>69</sup> It is interesting to compare the debate around capitalist 'products' with Lilly Irani's account of a conversation between the entrepreneurial founder of a design studio and an international funding foundation similar to the ones Baan's NGO seeks to attract. In that exchange, it is the foundation who are pushing the designer to deliver a scalable 'product' and not just reports or 'insight'. (Irani 2019:99).

most of Baan's friends in Delhi are Teach-Them alumni, and he is used to being valued by reference to his dedication to the movement. If his organisation is to have the best chance of success, Baan feels he cannot afford to be ostracised professionally. He rightly understands that Govind and I, as anti-capitalist educationalists, might be less interested in collaborating with Clear-Space if we see it as an organisation that creates 'products' – but wrongly assumes that his capitalist tendencies would result in our termination of friendship. But Baan cannot fully see this, because he imagines we see him like he sees himself: as 100% Clear-Space.

Throughout this section, we see Baan's frustration with the value his peers put on terminology and language. Here, he asks, 'What is the right word?', as if it is just the *words* that peers take issue with, and not the ethico-politics that the words signify. Baan's attitude to words and ideas reflects Divya's frustration in Chapter 2. Just as it used to 'drive' Divya 'nuts' when she saw 'people intellectualising the problem' instead of 'doing something', Baan is angered that peers fret over terminology rather than focusing on practical work. Overall, Baan seems less bothered about engaging capitalist methods to develop the education movement and more worried that – in this minefield of language – his words will render him abject and reveal him to be 'bad'. In my view, Baan doesn't have a problem with capitalism, his problem is that the education social sector in India is steeped in socialist principles, and those who follow these principles are deemed 'good'. Baan's view is ironic because in the last 20 years of Indian education development, it has been millionaire capitalists who have been funding the movement and calling the shots. The affective intensity of Baan's moment above is evidence of how it feels to be a socially-motivated educationalist in Delhi in 2019: there is a pressure to submit to capitalist principles to grow your NGO, and there is a pressure to remain 'socialist' in your values. This is the tension inherent in the term 'social-entrepreneur'.

\*

### **Vignette E: The impossibility of being 100% ... and embracing the antihero**

We now enter the fourth Social Entrepreneur Circle; the theme is 'Resilient Organisations', and there are only three participants. Baan, Deepika, and Bhargav, a fellow at Teach-Them who is not yet a social entrepreneur. After the mind-mapping and theatre sketches, Deepika is called away for a family emergency, and only Baan, Bhargav and I are left to discuss. The

focus returns to the ethico-political; if last time Baan felt attacked for using capitalist language, this time the topics are feminism and classism.

The below extract is woven together from Baan's introspective monologue which dominated the last 30 minutes of the discussion:

I am on a journey with the values I preach. I don't think I'll ever reach a point where I can say I'm 100% accepting, I'm 100% non-judgemental, I'm 100% non-biased.

For example, the feminism thing. I realise that when I'm angry I use certain language that I judge another for using, and then I get angry at them for using it. In this moment I am moving away from the very value of equality, of really accepting people.

What we need is kindness. So, if you Rich see Bhargav do 10 things, and according to you he does 8 things that meet your definition of feminism but there are 2 times he screws up, you still continue to respect him equally and not judge him.

Today I'll tell you, one of my constant fears is that I don't want to say things which might piss off Rich, or might piss off Evaara, or Arushi, or Divya or Mukesh.

Because in my movement that I am a part of, which is the removing of education inequity, I see these people as massive influencers. I feel that there is a possibility that if I say something wrong to Rich, or Mukesh, or Arushi, they might say: I don't want to work with you.

And for me *that* is really scary.

Social ostracization is rampant in the social sector. If Tushar [head of another NGO], by chance says something wrong, some wrong 'ism', he will be supremely ostracised, or if I do something, I'll be super ostracised.

A lot of my actions emerge from this constant fear of how that might impact the work of my organisation. It's a constant fear. Today someone shared on the Teach-Them [whatsapp] group an article about a start-up where the journalist had written they work with 'uneducated mothers'.

And Evaara pointed it out [the term 'uneducated' is deemed classist, it devalues low-income people for their lack of formal schooling]. And the immediate response of the founder, Virat, was like: I'm sorry, we didn't write it etc.

The people who are the gatekeepers of these ethics are not compassionate enough.

I see that I have a lot of friends who are entrepreneurs, but only 3 out of 10 of them are engaging in conversations like this [political ones, e.g., about patriarchy]. And those are the three who are facing the brunt of being called out.

Like, when you become a little better, when you are ahead on that road to feminism, you are expected to be this perfect person, but there is no acknowledgement for the path you've travelled. And it's taking me a lot of courage to say this because – they say 'you want acknowledgement, then become a fucking feminist' etc.

What I want, for next 3 months at least, is that if I make a mistake, in my interpretation, in my actions, if I do something massively wrong: just don't tell me, just let it go.

Because if you judge me, then tomorrow when there is a very valid point that we make as an organisation, which will surpass our organisation boundaries, like if we say, 'Every teacher needs to get paid better', there is a very high chance of you ignoring it simply because *I* said it. *Because* you have certain other ideas of me.

\*

Let us take a moment to appreciate Baan's courage, not only in speaking his mind in the semi-private Social Entrepreneur Circle, but his courage to allow me to share his innerworld as part of this PhD thesis. As Baan says, there are a great many educationalists who do not engage with the patriarchal and class-based structural violence which the education development sector perpetuates. Here, Baan is self-confident enough to share how difficult he finds it to be vigilant to the violence embedded in normative language, and self-reflective enough to admit that he judges others for mistakes he knows he has committed himself. I love Baan for his dedication to self-exploration; I use his life to explore my theory of purposed-leadership because I trust that *he* will not ostracise *me* for this act. I too fear what Baan fears – and I am analysing Baan despite his request for his mistakes to be 'let go'.

Here, Baan's desire to escape the judgement of his peers transmutes into a 'value'; he wants those around him to be more 'kind' and 'compassionate'; he is exhausted from his attempts to do all '10 things' right. Baan is also very honest in his appraisal of the impossibility of acting and speaking in a way that is 100% 'ethical'; he is frustrated that he must defend himself every time he 'slips', and longs to be accepted as someone who is 'on the road' to political righteousness.

Baan's language betrays the quantitative lens through which he analyses the discourse of ethico-politics. To make sense of his fear of being ostracised, Baan attempts to settle the ethical score via another pie-chart method of self-appraisal. This is unsurprising, because the use of percentages is also a key aesthetic trope of the OKR system – displayed in the Desiring Data vignette above – which Clear-Space use as a work and staff management tool. Here, Baan at once recognises the impossibility of a human acting '100%' non-biased, but at the same time wants his actions and words to be accurately accounted. For every '8 things that meet your definition of feminism ... there are 2 times he screws up', and so Baan wants to be marked as he would have marked Bhargav, in this case, as an 8-out-of-10 feminist. If 'the gatekeepers of these ethics' did their accounting properly, they wouldn't deign to judge him.

\*

As the formal space of the fourth SEC ended, Baan, Bhargav and I drifted onto the street outside. Away from the air-conditioners of the Teach-Them office and the surveillance of my recording device, Baan and I continued our exploration of our desire to be judged as ethical. Baan spoke about the aura of Govind or Debesh – the founder of Wider Community, and Govind's predecessor as organisation head – or Tushar (mentioned above). He said:

the way they come into a room,  
they have a certain energy,  
they attract you in some way.

He said it with love and respect, without bitterness. I countered Baan; I told him of times I saw Debesh acting with arrogance and despotic authority. Baan joined in the critique by saying that Wider Community pretends not be hierarchical, but of course it is: 'if Govind says there's no retreat this year, who's going to stop him?'

Baan continues, 'if Govind is the "angel" of the social space because he is "ethical", then I'll be the devil, the villain of the education sector'. A successful devil, because although he uses capitalist language and fails to be 100% feminist, he also raises lots of money and 'gets things done'. This is the first time I've heard Baan frame his struggle for both social acceptance and professional success in these Manichean terms. By articulating this story, Baan is no longer defined as a failure of the ethico-political (as opposed to the perceived 'success' of Govind)

but is relocated into an extreme binary position: as someone who has similar ambitions to his would-be rival but has chosen different methods i.e. capitalism over socialism.

It is when Baan indulges in the fantasy of devilhood that the power of self-narrative is fully revealed. This is Baan's safe space, a story in which by accepting a role as a devil Baan is no longer a valid subject for ethical critique: everyone knows devils are bad. This is a moment of *affective intensity*. After a full day's work and a long evening supporting his anthropologist friend with his research, Baan is searching for stories that protect him from judgement. Here, we see a glimmer of what self-actualisation might bring: self-actualisation frees you from judgement and emancipates you from the stickiness of daily ethics. Frustrated that his devotion to Teach-Them's mission is not providing this self-actualisation – this harmony of self where Baan is loved and respected – Baan rests on the logic of metrics as ballast in the storm. He will be loved by a different group of people than those who love Govind, and they will assess him accurately, because they will see how much Baan himself has quantitatively contributed to the Teach-Them cause.

But is devilhood really the path for Baan? No, this is only the Baan revealed in moments of affective intensity. In moments of stress, he begins to fantasise about achieving an 'aura of respect' like Govind's, and, unable to see why he hasn't received that respect, builds a narrative in which his main quality – determination – is valued and known. This is the Teach-Them logic of value, where grit and determination are all you need to succeed. It worked it seemed for Baan during the fellowship: he taught the kids and completed two years as a classroom teacher. But, in his desire to practice purposed-leadership after his time at Teach-Them, Baan is confronted with a more complex reality of society: one in which certain personalities draw more affection than others.

The battle inside Baan is a battle I also carry. I too fantasise that I will find a life purpose that will absolve me from the daily work of negotiating situated ethics, and structural, discursive violence. I fantasise about self-actualisation through self-exploration and authentic communication – and somehow writing this thesis is an attempt to self-actualise through this method. I am unsure if writing my thesis will do more harm or good; I sit with this ambivalence and prepare to be called out for my mistakes, for the acts of discursive violence I commit. I write this because in the next section we see Baan in one of his most vulnerable moments, at a point where he seems ready to remove himself from the community of Teach-Them peers and

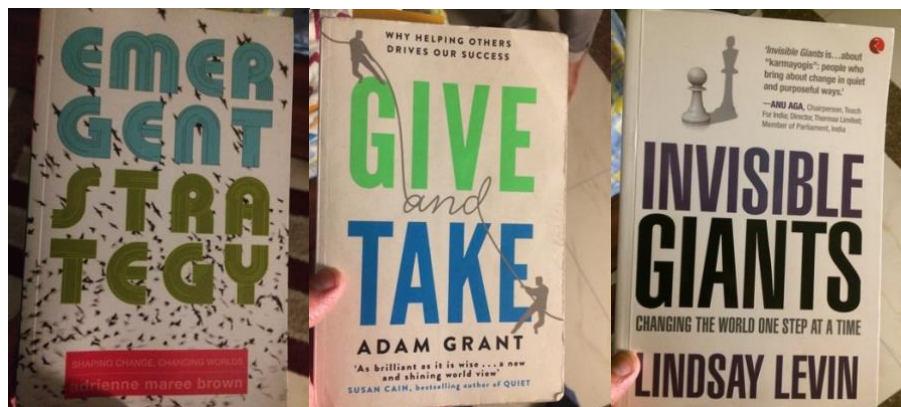


step into the stratosphere of fame where he hopes to be free of peer-review. I believe it is the value of purposed-leadership that leads Baan this far, and I am angry and sad at the power of this value to misguide a friend.

### **Vignette F: Fame as emancipation – or a relation of cruel optimism?**

Delhi. March 2019. In a week's time Prime Minister Narendra Modi will appear on TV screens across India and announce a nationwide lockdown due to outbreak of COVID-19. I have invited Baan out to dinner at a relatively expensive pizza place. We eat our food, look at the price of beers, and decide to go back to his place for whiskey.

Before we settle down on the sofas, Baan wanders into his room to get something and I follow. On his bedside table lie three books:



None of the above books are about schooling, none are about children, none are about the education sector at all. According to their Amazon blurbs:

*Emergent Strategy* is radical self-help, society-help, and planet-help.

*Give and Take* changes our fundamental understanding of why we succeed, offering a new model for our relationships

*Invisible Giants* is about leadership, choices in life and the potential in everyone to make a difference.<sup>70</sup>

Baan speaks about himself as being part of the ‘movement’ of ‘removing education inequity’ – a movement Baan was initiated into by Teach-Them – but this does not mean Baan is particularly interested in pedagogy, curriculum, child psychology, the sociology of schooling, or any other intellectual topic related to education. As two men partaking in the self-consciously (colonial) male ritual of whiskey, we reflect on his deeper ambitions that relate to the three books on his nightstand.

Me: It’s complicated. No-one has the answer to fixing education systems in India.

B: I’ll tell you who does, Aditya Natraj and me. I may sound arrogant putting myself in a box with him, but I’ll tell you why. Because we don’t just do one thing: I’m not good at music, or arts, or even the best teacher – but I’m good at looking at the problem and adapting to find solutions.

Aditya Natraj is the founder of Kaivalya Education Foundation, an NGO that coaches government school principals on leadership. In the mid 2000s Natraj quit his corporate job in IT to begin a redemptive ‘give something back’ journey where he launched an organisation that uses business principles to ‘solve’ problems in education. Baan idolises Natraj because Kaivalya are now believed to have a strong influence over how government schools run in Maharashtra, the main Indian state in which they operate. Natraj is locally famous: as a key figure in the IERM, he is invited to panel discussions where ‘influencers’ of education development give ‘inspirational’ speeches to others in the ‘movement’.

Baan does not know Natraj like he knows Govind (the angel) but the former acts as point of identification in counterweight to the latter. Natraj is also a ‘devil’: he is not 100% feminist. He uses capitalist-language like ‘products’ to discuss his education projects, and he is famous and successful. Natraj gives Baan hope because the entrepreneur is an example of someone who isn’t traditionally successful in ‘music’, the ‘arts’, or being a ‘teacher’, but has surpassed others who are because he is good at finding ‘solutions’. The methods of entrepreneurship embodied by Natraj are echoed in the books sitting on Baan’s bedstand; the message is that

---

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Emergent-Strategy-Shaping-Change-Changing/dp/1849352607>  
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Give-Take-Helping-Others-Success/dp/1780224729>  
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Invisible-Giants-Changing-World-Step/dp/1908363053>

‘design’ and ‘systems’ can be engineered by humans to provide more efficient output, happier people, better lives – all without direct acknowledgement of structural inequality, a global ideological system named by bell hooks as ‘white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy’ (hooks 2013).

Does design have any truck with ethics? In *Chasing Innovation*, Lilly Irani (2019) tracks the messianic rise of design as a process by which educational development in India can flourish. The emancipation promised by the myth of the perfect design is perhaps even more seductive than the purported love and prosperity imagined to be gained by achieving self-actualisation through purposed-leadership. Strategy is to organisations what design is to objects. Baan dreams of *conducting*, of being at the centre of a network of people who – through his design – deliver impactful shifts in the landscape of education quality and provision. In Chapter 2, we saw how Divya wishes to coach her team as individuals with purpose, and not manage them as members of staff. For Baan, the individual becomes less important: instead, each team member is a cog in calibrated and machinic system. Perhaps the difference between Baan and Divya is a function of their respective distance from the supposed end point of their educational work; Divya still desires to be in school implementing the 2050 game, Baan is happy to design from afar. For Lilly Irani, key to the ambitions of her designers is that they move up the ‘value chain’: they want clients to see them as ‘consultants’ not ‘vendors’ (2019:93-96). Baan also desires the cultural and financial capital that comes from being seen as an expert consultant rather than a service provider.

Knowing Baan’s interest in organisational strategy I continue the conversation as follows:

Me: Baan, one day you will lecture on organisational systems, on how organisations work, and how to be a growing, learning organisation.

Baan: I hope so. I do want to be famous, so what if my drive to become famous makes me do good work in the process, then what’s the problem?

Away from the public scrutiny of media articles and Whatsapp groups, in which social entrepreneurs like Baan are judged by their peers on their commitment to being self-sacrificial and dedicated to ‘the mission’, Baan can relax and enjoy the fantasy of being adored. But the defensive tone of his rhetorical question betrays his lingering doubt that his desire for fame is

wholly unproblematic. After all, Baan is aware that Govind would never say he wants to be famous – and it is Baan himself who sees Govind as the angel who is loved.

Baan is unhappy with the way his Teach-Them community and NGO colleagues treat him. He wants them to accurately account his dedication to the movement and wants to feel the result of that accounting: he wants to be less critiqued for his political-discursive mistakes and more loved for his role as caring leader. Will fame bring Baan the adoration he desires?

The fame Baan imagines seems to exist in a fantasy world beyond accountable community. He has had a taste of that fame because he is well-known in Teach-Them circles for his role at Clear-Space. When Baan, in an earlier vignette, exclaims that his peers can ‘fuck off’, he is articulating the distance that already exists between his fame and their own. Fame, for Baan, seems desirable because it promises distance – not collectivity. Fame is alluring because you can escape those who know your past and enter a new social plane. Fame symbolises a selfhood that is luminary, extra-terrestrial, outside the orbit of other normal people. Celebrities exist in a different ethical and social world. Baan, in his most vulnerable moments, wants to release himself from the very ethical dilemmas that make us human. He wants the impunity of a god, or of an exalted saint who has been emancipated from messy immanence and been delivered into transcendent self-actualisation.

But it doesn’t work – because if Baan is ‘released’ from the community of educators who monitor his behaviour, he no longer has a community to support him. This is how Baan seems caught in ‘cruel optimism’. To reiterate, ‘A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ (Berlant 2011:1). Fame for Baan here is in some way equivalent to self-actualisation: once he becomes successful enough, he will have self-actualised. But on his journey to self-actualisation Baan retracts himself from the community who he is so desperate to be seen and known by. Fame will bring the empty and alienated adorations of others who hardly know him, and his friends will be alienated by the contours of his new life. Baan’s fate will be that of the brothers in Berlant’s chosen novel, who, by becoming rich, are released from their poverty *and* from a community in which they can be understood (Berlant 2011:37-43). The optimism Baan feels at the sense that he will be free from judgement if he becomes famous is cruel: at the very point he gains fame – when he has mastered purposed-leadership – he will no longer be a peer to the friends who are still seeking a role in the education development community of Teach-Them.

Simultaneously, Baan suffers cruel optimism in a different sense: the harder he seems to work towards his goal to run a successful and impactful education social enterprise, the more difficult it seems to achieve. The intensity of Baan's subjective discomfort also has effects beyond his own self-development and the growth of his organisation, as we see in the closing vignette of the chapter below.

## Outro: feminism, masculinity, and purposed-leadership

### Vignette G: Deepika's Jeans – policing bodies for the cause

We return to the fourth Social Entrepreneur Circle. For context: Deepika, the entrepreneur who we met above, was Baan's personal mentee for the duration of her Teach-Them teaching fellowship. For two years, Baan was Deepika's line manager and unofficial 'coach'.

It's a few minutes before the start of the Circle and I'm nervously waiting for more attendees. As we wait, Baan and I sit on swivel chairs and chat. Deepika enters and I jump up to greet her. Baan observes her clothes and asks about her jeans. Deepika looks a little nervous and says:

- Deepika: Yeah, I've never had ripped jeans before ... umm, I was thinking about getting them stitched but ...
- Baan: You should. You can't go around looking like that, you're a social entrepreneur now
- Deepika: I don't wear these to meetings or anything
- Baan: You have to look professional at all times
- Deepika: Yeah, but ...
- Baan: Sometimes I sit in Starbucks and overhear a couple of guys talking about tech. I go over and say 'hello, I work in government school partnerships etc' ... that's why I don't wear shorts, you don't know who you might meet ...

As we know from above, Baan has deeply invested his personhood in the identity of being a social entrepreneur of education. During her fellowship, Deepika was his mentee. Now that she too is becoming a social entrepreneur, Baan reinstates himself as mentor and offers direct sartorial advice. Baan's tone and energy in the exchange betrays his belief in the self-sacrificial: a social entrepreneur is not entitled to a 'personality' beyond that of their cause. They must present themselves as the vector they are: a conduit that allows funds/followers to be attracted to the cause so that education practices and policy change, and education inequity in India melts away.

But the above event must be seen for what it is, a materialisation of patriarchy: it displays a man policing a woman's body. Indeed, the archetypal social entrepreneur of education in Delhi is male. It is women, therefore, who are expected to discard acts of self-expression – wearing ripped jeans – and submit to a semi-corporate, 'unmarked' (masculine) aesthetic that proves their professionalism.<sup>71</sup>

In the moment above, Baan projects his anxiety to be the ideal purposed-leader onto Deepika: Baan himself wishes he could wear shorts, but he has sacrificed this personal desire for the mission he serves. Although Baan attends reflection circles specifically concerning patriarchy, gender, and sexual abuse, in the moment above the symbol of the purposed-leader overshadows his other political attachments. Perhaps we can read it this way: for Baan, organisations do not suffer from gender. In Baan's image of himself as 100% Clear-Space, he is unmarked and genderless, and so Deepika, a fellow social entrepreneur, must subsume her gender to that of her burgeoning organisation. But, as we know from decades of feminist scholarship (de Beauvoir 1949; Irigaray 1985; Lorde 1984), to claim that any subjectivity is 'unmarked' is to allow the normativity of the masculine heterosexuality to go unquestioned.

Baan, in this moment of affective intensity, responds to Deepika's clothes with one purpose and one purpose only: to make her more successful as a social entrepreneur. In this moment, he misses his chance to practice the politics he believes in because of the intensity of the

---

<sup>71</sup> Baan is not the only education entrepreneur I met who placed such weight on clothing. In a speech to Teach-Them fellows thinking of entrepreneurship, Sanjay, the head of a private college that seeks to make India the number one higher education provider of Development Studies, said, 'I always wear jeans and a Western style shirt. I want to divorce the image of the *jhola* [cloth bag] carrying, *kurta* [traditional Indian shirt] wearing socialist from 21<sup>st</sup> century social work in India'.

pressure to practice idealised purposed-leadership. In this way, purposed-leadership comes to blind people like Baan to any other politics or political awareness, and thereby narrows the potential for what this Indian Education Reform Movement could do.

### **Self-as-NGO, quantitative personhood, masculinity, and me**

What, then, does our study of Baan tell us about what happens to Teach-Them alumni who pin their hopes of self-actualisation on practising purposed-leadership?

One effect of Baan's dedication to purposed-leadership is that he has fixed his own identity to that of his education NGO. And the less space there is between Baan the person and Baan the CEO, the more vulnerable Baan is if his organisation does something unfavourable to the 'gatekeepers' of ethics – the same people he wants to be his friends. Some of these friends, like his co-founder Mukesh, advise Baan to take breaks – to learn to value things outside the success of the NGO. But Mukesh has a family, he has found love and happiness through different methods and does not need the fantasy of self-actualisation through purposed-leadership in the way Baan does.

Baan adopts a quantitative methodology to assess both his success as leader and ethical being. Influenced both by the methods of monitoring and evaluation favoured by funders and the assessment tools used in contemporary education development, Baan attempts to measure his value as a person. Baan makes little distinction between his professional and personal self, and so all evaluation of Clear-Space lands also as evaluation of self, and vice versa. This method of self-appraisal has left Baan angry and bitter, and his solution to these feelings is to further embrace his devotion to purposed-leadership: he fantasises about becoming famous to escape peer-delivered ethical judgement.

And yet during this journey toward becoming an idealised 'purposed-leader', Baan engages with ethico-political problems of his time in a way that cuts against the essence of how Lilly Irani defines the contemporary Indian 'entrepreneurial citizen'. For Irani, 'more than a set of methods, principles, or epistemologies, what entrepreneurial citizens share is an ethos of collaboration, experimental life, empathic civic interest, and the monitoring of possibility' (2019:13) – but Baan recognises historical structural violence too. He recognises the violence

of systemic patriarchy in India – and in the colonial powers that have influenced it – and is trying to be a feminist. It is precisely Baan's potential for doing more politically engaged work that makes his desire for purposed-leadership so tragic. So what is it that draws Baan further away from the school – the site of intervention – and into the realm of individual social entrepreneurship that exacerbates his isolation?

Perhaps it is Baan's *masculine* subjectivity that compounds his desire for leadership. Mattison Mines presents the cultural trope of the South Asian 'big man', a person who uses an organisation as 'vehicle for his leadership' (Mines and Gourishankar 1990:784). For Mines, these men develop a symbiotic relationship with the organisations they run so that there ceases to be a difference between the person, the 'big man', and the organisation itself. Baan, we have seen, is wedded to his self-image of being '100% Clear-Space' – and I've analysed how some of his emotional problems arise because of the intensity of his elision of self/work.

As we see in the final vignette, it is not only Baan who suffers from his dedication to purposed-leadership. As a man, he is disposed to reinstate patriarchal violence in any unreflective action. I state this because I highly identify with Baan – both in his desire for purposed-leadership and in the way he reproduces patriarchy as a collateral effect of his policing of Deepika. Like Baan, I desire to be adored for the brilliant work I have done for the world. Like Baan, I become frustrated when someone calls me out for a patriarchal comment that I made subconsciously – and want to be forgiven and for the judgement to go away. Like Baan, I've been caught in moments of affective intensity where the courageous decision of a female friend has caused in me an envy that has produced some act of patriarchal moral policing. Like Baan, I fear being ostracised by my community for reproducing such violence.

I wrote this chapter on Baan in part to process my own desire for purposed-leadership, and to confront how difficult it is to devote oneself to purposed-leadership and still sit with the necessary ethical dilemmas that enrich the critical, political, sensitive, and loving communities of which I wish to be part.

What I offer Baan in this chapter is a new concept through which he can reflect on his ambition and fear: the concept of purposed-leadership. I suggest that if Baan and I want to avoid the ostracization we fear, we are better off accepting the ambiguity of ethics rather than the apparent simplicity of the 'devil' path. There is no luminary position that can protect us from



the anguish of relational care, and to seek such fantastical absolution is an act of cruel optimism that will never result in self-actualisation, whatever that might be.

In the next chapter, my complex relationships with male purposed-leaders continues as we meet a social entrepreneur who – despite never attending the Teach-Them training Centre – seems to operate with the most extreme belief in the self-as-the-locus-of-social-change.

## *Chapter 4.*

# *Purposed-Leadership as Self-Actualisation, Self-Actualisation as Social Change?*

\*

## **Introduction to Chapter 4**

### **Overview of Chapter**

The final chapter of this thesis focuses on Prashant, a person who I came to see as an archetypal social entrepreneur of education in Delhi. The chapter is an exploration of how Prashant's experiences of love and self-worth during childhood have influenced his commitment to teaching purposed-leadership. I argue that the education project of bringing social-emotional learning (SEL) to schools, the mission of Prashant's NGO, Kshamta, becomes a conduit through which Prashant can find purpose, practice leadership, and develop himself as someone who is valuable 'as a person'. I explore how – in ways similar to Baan – Prashant uses his professional mission as a method for managing his psychological needs.

My main point is that Prashant's experience of the world has led him to a position where he gains his self-esteem from promoting the value of purposed-leadership. I do not focus on Prashant to call him out as an example of an educator who isn't 'really' motivated for social change, and who instead 'uses' his work for self-gain; I focus on Prashant because he is an extreme example of how purposed-leadership as a value lives in the work and thoughts of Delhi's young entrepreneurial educators. I choose Prashant because he chose to confide in me, and because I hope to continue a professional connection with him. Again, Prashant, I hope you understand what I am trying to do by writing this chapter about you. I am using you as a learning tool for us all, as a way of exploring how complicated it is to know our own selves,

and how difficult it is to find a way to educate children that both serves our ambitions for social justice and is fair and ethical to the children themselves.

\*

The first part of the chapter explores three major themes of this thesis: selfhood, family, and purpose. I present an ethnographic poem that tells Prashant's life story in his own words. It is a text I have woven together from cut-up pieces of a long biographical interview with Prashant that represents this entrepreneur's rollercoaster ride from despair to tentative self-belief.

The second part reveals Prashant telling a truncated version of the above life story to a group of teenage boys studying in an NGO-run school. Here, three more themes continue to emerge: (i) the ethics of teaching purposed-leadership, (ii) the philosophy of self-reliance – similar to Divya's focus on 'self-management' in Chapter 2 – and (iii) the way that teaching purposed-leadership becomes antithetical to promoting the SEL which Prashant's NGO promotes.

I close by again questioning what happens when the 'self' is seen as the origin of ambition and the primary reason for one's failure or success in life. I return to a refrain that runs through this chapter – Prashant's desire to be valued *as a person* – and compare it to how Baan also suffers this anxiety. What becomes clear is that the intensity of needing evidence of one's value seems to increase in proportion to the distance at which an educationalist operates from the site of education interventions themselves.

# Prashant as a person

## Prashant: An Ethnographic Poem

The defining moments in life are when  
people believe in me as a person.

Entrance exams and  
Board exams diverge.  
It became too serious  
Too quickly

She came into my room while I was sleeping  
Sat on my bed, crying,  
The result is out.

It was the most horrible day of my life  
I thought I'd let my family down.

Marked as a failure in life  
by the way people looked at you.  
Horrible because I had no friends in school,  
No one who wanted to talk to me  
or trusted me,

I had no understanding  
I did not know how to do  
anything in life,  
to make me employable,

more importantly - I had no understanding  
what my purpose was

\*

A mentor, a family friend  
Began a start-up.  
My pitch to him:

I'll sweep the floors, I'll do anything and everything,  
I just want to learn with you.  
I have a lot of anger,  
the world has always done wrong by me,  
and I want to devote that anger  
to learning.

They were the most talented individuals in India,  
They were the sharpest people.

I was nurtured.  
I felt these people understand where I'm coming from,  
and that they would bet on me.  
I was always given the blue sky.  
Think blue sky.

I was given very unsolvable problems.  
I learnt the skill of adapting,  
I realised:  
I want to make a billion-dollar company  
of my own.

But my learning was getting stagnant,  
I wanted to learn French,  
I started to question dogma.

I took admission at *Alliance Française*.  
On the first day I met a girl,

I told her I don't know when or how,  
but I'm going to marry you,  
I find you to be the love of my life.

She pushed my notion of service.  
She pushed me to learn what reality can be.

\*

A village immersion  
with an NGO.  
She was going -  
I wanted to go to be with her  
I wanted to understand how someone can  
be a change agent.

I was so foolish back then, I thought:  
if there are 10,000 villages in the country,  
I want to figure out one problem  
that exists in all villages  
and make a solution for that,  
and that will be my jackpot.

I submitted my application:  
'Competitive by nature, nice by choice'

Sharpness is defined  
by critical ability – the ability to analyse things.  
My group, we were generally change makers;  
very sharp, very critical, very empathetic.

In the village there was this differently-abled child.  
He had downs-syndrome – his name was Akash.

Someone said '*isse baat mat karo. Wo pagal hai.*'<sup>72</sup>

He said it in front of everyone.

And I could see myself in the boy.

I gave some pens to Akash,  
he was just drawing and painting,  
he was so happy  
Rich, I can't explain.

I was sitting next to him,  
I started to cry,  
Because I could see so much potential in him.

And while he could not speak,  
there was this language.

You have to ask to stay  
in a house in the village.  
Mine was a house with one mother  
and seven daughters.

I remember they had one room,  
and they opened that room for me.  
I just could feel the love  
and the emotion and everything.

There was so much food –  
I just remember that love and affection.

Sitting at the Ahmedabad airport,  
Coming back to Delhi.

---

<sup>72</sup> 'Don't talk with him. He's crazy'

I was just crying.  
I can't do this anymore,  
I don't want to do the start-up,  
I just want to explore the social space.

\*

I've always believed that I'm a very selfish person.  
I've always done what I wanted to do.

My family were like:  
what the hell are you doing?  
NGOs are done by girls.  
The social space is taken up by rich old women.

I was living at home.  
I've always understood that  
needs are very finite  
and that these materialistic things  
do not matter very much,  
but my sister would call survival  
a Louis Vuitton bag.

We asked ourselves:  
what do we want to do in education?

I said jobs will get more automated,  
people sit at home, but that does not translate  
into them doing more of their passions,  
into being more empathetic,  
into living their purpose.

Education never enables us to deal with ambiguity.  
The world is changing, your kids aren't ready.



\*

So now that we have three schools,  
what do we want to do?  
We always had the start-up mentality:  
get the customer, then decide what the product is.

Asian people have a different understanding of how we grow.  
There is this concept of interconnectedness,  
we have a very strong sense of family,  
we have a very strong sense of community.

You can tell a Danish boy that  
you have to leave your family,  
but the same conversation with an Indian boy is going to be  
very different.

Delhi government sent out a call for  
Happiness Curriculum,  
our proposal was shortlisted.

Other orgs who pitched before us  
pitched morals and values;  
and Mukul Ji thrashed them.  
Thrashed them.  
Saying: I'm not trying to inculcate morals,  
this is not moral education.

We went up there with  
our honesty and humility,  
that we are a small organisation  
and we are trying to learn.

They asked us back for another interview,  
we went in and thrashed the government,  
teachers are not going to classrooms,  
I thrashed the government openly.

They said: what do you expect?  
We said: to learn from you.  
They took us on.

Using an extremely scalable model of delivery,  
leveraging existing teaching resources  
building ownership,  
we allotted a permanent position  
offered in school:  
Happiness Coordinator.

To our understanding we were  
the youngest organisation ever to work at state-level.

\*

Relationships with my parents  
have transformed for the good.  
I've focused on myself,  
I've gotten clarity through reflection  
as regards what I do and why I do it.

SEL is a very intuitive way of looking at things.  
It is intuition to push someone to think of the right notions.

We fell in love thinking about systems change  
and how it can transform lives.

Suddenly in the social space it was the

flavour of the season to have a social enterprise.

But the incubation space does not know  
what a social enterprise truly entails.  
It's accepted throughout the ecosystem –  
It's stupid to call yourself a social enterprise  
if you don't make any money at all.

We reflected: should we stop working with schools directly,  
and instead just work with governments?  
But in all honesty, I did not have the courage  
to say no to Prem Sir.  
He bet on us.

Now our model looks like this:  
co-create scalable interventions with government,  
then run 'innovation hubs' at NGO schools.

We run experiments on SEL there.  
No one knows what will happen after 5 years of SEL.  
We said:  
we want to see  
gender equality,  
better learning outcomes,  
poverty alleviation,  
better employability,  
mental health and well-being improvements,  
social innovation.

Can children become changemakers,  
effective changemakers to go forward?

We applied for incubation.  
We didn't get selected.

We got feedback:  
we weren't able to explain our program effectively.  
But I don't think they should ask:  
why do you want to be incubated under us?  
They should just be asking  
they should  
they should just give you money

People are not investing in people anymore

\*

Now, it's very evident to my parents  
how I've grown as a person  
partly because of the recognition  
that our work has gotten,  
now they see me  
in a very different light.

My mom and my dad  
contributed 1000 rupees,  
that was the maximum that they could afford.  
They were like:  
we really believe in what you're doing now.

Happiness Curriculum is for those in  
multidimensional poverty.  
It is actually the most  
accurate way of judging poverty.

They come from violent homes,  
they come from not-loved,  
not affection, so they don't feel needed.

They can't even focus in class,  
because children have not been  
taught how to fundamentally cope.

Suddenly when a child says to their mom:  
Thank you so much,  
*apne khana khaya tha*  
(I've eaten your food)  
She learns the power of gratitude.

We did a survey and we got data.  
75% percent of teachers said  
parents have spoken about  
the Happiness Curriculum.

\*

The Dutta family is one of the  
wealthiest families in the country.  
As wealthy as the Ambanis.  
They gave us 5 lakh rupees.

It took us one-and-a-half years  
to convert them.

They called me to their house.  
Their house is bigger than a palace.  
In modern day Delhi.  
For them 5 lakh is nothing  
but I learned so much from these people.  
They are so humble

They are some of the richest people in the country

but they are so humble.

At their own core  
the kind of qualities  
that I see from them  
is insane.

They have so much money  
but there is no bragging.  
They still heard me.  
Heard my story.

They wanted to understand where I'm coming from.  
They kept understanding me as a person.

What has happened is that people  
have believed in us as people.

Whatever money Kshamta has gotten  
we've gotten when people have loved us as people.

They have just loved the potential of Prashant and Rupali.

\*

### **Entrepreneurialism as redemption**

The above poem is a copy-and-paste verbatim edit of recorded interviews I took with Prashant in September and October 2019. It is the journey of a boy whose inadequate marks in his final school exams lead him to launch an NGO that promotes social-emotional learning in schools.

The aim of this section is to interrogate the desire which acts as Prashant's key refrain in the poem: his desire to be 'believed in as a person'.

What does Prashant mean by being ‘believed in as a person’? What he doesn’t mean is that a person should be accepted and supported only as much as they have the potential to carry an idea from inception to fruition – which is how a social entrepreneur is judged. Prashant and Rupali, as founders of Kshamta, have struggled to gain financial support from the grant making bodies who run incubators for NGO start-ups. This defeat frustrates them. But Prashant did secure support from two places: the Delhi government chose them as one of six NGOs to collaborate on the Happiness Curriculum, and a wealthy business family offered their financial patronage. So, when Prashant says, ‘People are not investing in people anymore’, he really means grant-making bodies seem to focus more on the viability of an education initiative, rather than the quality of the person pitching the idea. In Prashant’s own analysis, he was only invested in when those in power saw the potential he had, rather than assessing the practicability of the project being pitched.

Furthermore, Prashant has a distrust of established institutions. Despite his success at securing a partnership with the Delhi government, Prashant complained – like so many entrepreneurial educators I met – of the corruption and laziness of government officials, and the inefficiency of working from a government office. But Prashant’s distrust of institutions runs deeper: it seems linked to his psycho-emotional well-being in childhood.

Prashant’s experience at school was disenchanting; he didn’t have many friends and he didn’t do too well academically. He attended a famous, elite, high-fee private school in Delhi – and received a reduction in fees due to family connections. Meanwhile, his parents struggled to find lucrative employment; they kept starting businesses that soon failed. His parents – a bit like Divya’s in Chapter 2 – didn’t have the extreme wealth of his classmates, but his mother’s parents were rich, and they financially supported Prashant’s immediate family in times of need. Prashant’s father, however, came from a lower-income background than his mother, and was never accepted by his mother’s family. When Prashant did poorly in his final school exams, he felt shame at disappointing his mother, but also anger that his school and family had failed him. The approval that Prashant seeks from his parents is clear in the development of the redemption narrative embedded in the poem above.

What does Prashant mean when he asks to be valued ‘as a person’? Anthropologist Michael Jackson claims that ‘all exchange involves a continual struggle to give, claim, or redistribute

some scarce and elusive *existential* good – such as recognition, love, humanity, happiness, voice, power, presence, honour, or dignity – *whose value is incalculable*’ (Jackson 2013:171). Prashant wants to be understood as a person. For Prashant, this personhood seems to be about the recognition and love suggested by Jackson. But as Jackson notes, the value of these existential ‘goods’ cannot be measured numerically, if at all. Prashant, like Baan, has invested his selfhood in that of his NGO. Like Baan, Prashant feels valued ‘as a person’ when people donate money to the organisation he founded. And because Prashant gave me such a detailed account of his relationship to his parents, we can engage in a more biographical reading of the origins of Prashant’s desire for this recognition.

Prashant did not feel adequately valued by the two institutions most central to a child’s life: the family and school. But Prashant has a sharp mind, an appetite for learning on his own terms, and he believes in a world that rewards people like him for the passion and determination they show. In short, Prashant dreams of an entrepreneurial world. But he has also been enchanted by another mission, the same mission of Teach-Them, which, incidentally, he has never been a part of. Prashant fantasises that the proliferation of SEL will lead to a world where neither parents nor schools will fail children, a world where the lack of love that he himself experienced as a child will be a thing of the past. It is by imagining how SEL will help parents love their children that Prashant can emotionally process his own pain of disappointing his family by not getting good exam results.

In the poem, Prashant mentions a mother who learns gratitude from her son who has been taught with the Happiness Curriculum. What is key here is that the child has learnt how to show gratitude to his mother by offering words of praise – ‘*apne khana khaya tha*’ (I’ve eaten your food). Words of praise seem important to Prashant because instead he receives insults; Prashant’s father told him, ‘NGO work is for girls’. It was made clear to me how powerful this insult was for Prashant because he recounted the event on four separate occasions across the course of my fieldwork.

My reading is that Prashant’s gratitude story is an act of psychological processing in which he reimagines his own relationship with his mother as a child. As we see above, it means a lot to Prashant that his parents contributed even the tiny sum of 1000 rupees [£10] to his NGO. These might not have been words of praise, but they showed Prashant that his parents believe in him. Whether they give his organisation money because they believe in him ‘as a person’ or for the



potential of Kshamta as an organisation is less clear – but because Prashant reads it as an act of love, we can assume he also reads it as an act of ‘believing in him as a person’.

How then has Prashant’s desire to redeem himself in the eyes of his parents influenced his relationship with purposed-leadership?

### **Prashant the changemaker**

Prashant did not find his purpose through formal education, he did not march off to university to study engineering or medicine and complete his degree ready to start a defined and illustrious career.<sup>73</sup> Neither did Prashant complete a degree, feel a sense of disenchantment with the corporate world, and apply for a fellowship at Teach-Them. In fact, I believe it is the frustration and disappointment with his own, nevertheless elite schooling that inspires him to revolutionise. Prashant has not experienced the rush of love that Teach-Them fellows seem to get from their pupils after sticking out the first six months of classroom teaching. Instead, he has had one germinal experience in a village with a differently-abled boy, multiplied by his identification with that child – ‘I could see myself in the boy. I could see so much potential in him’, he said. In Prashant’s telling, the boy was said to be ‘crazy’, and the rest of the village wouldn’t talk with him. Just like the boy, Prashant feels undervalued and misunderstood. He feels underserved by society – especially the institutions of family and school – and through the Happiness Curriculum he has found a way to improve both. SEL will teach kids to love in school and those kids can teach their parents at home. Then, when those kids become parents, they will give their children the emotional support that Prashant sorely lacked.

But Prashant’s conception of SEL, is deeply structured by purposed-leadership, entrepreneurial citizenship, and the thoughts of Bill Drayton – the person who coined the term ‘social entrepreneur’. As Drayton himself writes:

The millennium when only a tiny elite could cause change is coming to an end. A generation hence, probably 20 to 30 percent of the world's people, and later 50 to 70

---

<sup>73</sup> In way Prashant’s decision to take an unpaid internship instead of paying to go to university is a sign that young Indians are starting to take heed of how higher education qualifications are not securing employment in contemporary India, see *Degrees without Freedom* (Jeffery et al 2008). In addition, following La Douza (2014:17), Prashant is also part of an ultra-elite who see quicker employment opportunities by skipping university altogether.

percent, not just today's few percent, will be changemakers and entrepreneurs. (Drayton 2006).

For Prashant, the method by which everyone becomes a changemaker is through teaching them the techniques of SEL, because SEL centralises self-reflection, and self-reflection leads 'changemakers' to discover their purpose. And Prashant has relied on his belief in SEL as a revolutionary event to develop his own life purpose. In true entrepreneurial style, Prashant – disappointed by the quality of the institutions around him – has decided to create an institution of his very own. In doing so, he has created for himself a position of leadership: he is the founder of an NGO. But he has also created a purpose: to ensure every child in India gains access to social-emotional learning. The key point here is that – as regards the upkeep of Prashant's purpose – it doesn't actually matter whether SEL 'really works'. Like Teach-Them's mission to end education inequity, it is the fantastical aura of the vision that makes it such an inspiring ambition to have. And as we see in second part of this chapter, it is in moments of affective intensity where Prashant's desire to practice purposed-leadership, and achieve his own emancipatory self-actualisation, conflicts with the delivery of SEL to the marginalised children his NGO aims to serve.

### **The 'person' as bounded and autonomous**

Despite Prashant's indisputably 'sharp' mind, Prashant seems a little blind to how much his own success has relied on his position within both traditional and novel regimes of power. It is Prashant's family connections that secure him an interview with a soon-to-be-millionaire tech entrepreneur and afford him the chance to travel to Europe.<sup>74</sup> As Lilly Irani puts it, it is the 'stability of his social relations' that allows him to succeed where others do not (Irani, 2019:108). Furthermore, it is the operational knowledge of start-ups gained during his internship that allow him to harness the method of social entrepreneurship which the neoliberal global education discourse is so keen to invest in.

Prashant's very conception of personhood is one which is independent of the institutions that forged it. For Prashant, people become people when they step outside of what is socially

---

<sup>74</sup> Prashant's family friend had influence in one of Delhi's elite rotary clubs, and helped him join an exchange to the Czech Republic

expected of them. For Prashant, the woman in the village did this when she ‘opened up’ her room to him. But of course, Prashant is unfamiliar with the customs of the village, where it is likely the case that accommodating an urban Brahmin like Prashant is a social obligation. My point here is that Prashant’s conception of a person is isomorphic with his conception of an entrepreneur. When the old mother in the village is most likely following the cultural norm, Prashant reads her generous behaviour as cavalier, spontaneous, and risk-taking. When reflecting on whether Kshamta should stop partnering with schools altogether, Prashant notes that he does not ‘have the courage’ to say no to his patron Prem Sir – the head of Kshamta’s partner school – because Prem Sir has ‘bet on’ them. Prashant values people who take risks, and he wants people to value him for being a risk-taker too.

But who can afford to take risks? And is it really a risk when you can afford to lose? In the next section I step away from Prashant for a moment to present a story from Rupali, a co-founder of Prashant’s organisation Kshamta. Both the Rupali section and the final Prashant section that follows show how the discourse of purposed-leadership produces a moral framework that hierarchises what the marginalised are expected to value.

I read the motivation of both Rupali and Prashant as caught up in the fulfilment of their own desire for purposed-leadership. Both Rupali and Prashant are trying hard to provide a revolutionary education for the children they serve. The problem, as is the core of this thesis, is that they carry an ‘autonomous’ notion of the self which obscures the cultural fact that humans live in socially-constructed communities of value.

## Reifying resilience, vicarious emancipation

### **Rupali: a snapshot**

In September 2019, when I first met and interviewed her, Rupali was 24 years old. She was born in Zambia, an only child to parents of a mixed-caste (*bania* and Punjabi) love marriage. When she was nine, she moved to India with her family. Although she was teased in school for having a boyish haircut, she felt lucky that her parents ‘weren’t too pushy about academics’ and she, ‘got comfortable with the fact that [she] was an average kid in school.’

Rupali is the co-founder of the start-up NGO Kshamta. I asked her what kind of SEL she experienced in childhood:

I had the space to be alone. Kids from well-off families are constrained by their schedule: every day you have school, tuition, tennis, blah blah blah, golf, come back home etc, right? Or in the case of the children we work with [from low-income families], their lives are so intertwined with people, and physical space constrains them. I had the privilege to be alone. I had access to a choice. The choice of what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it. Choice in terms of career, choice in terms of everything I was given, so that's where my resilience or whatever little risk-taking I have, that's where it comes from, apart from support of parents.

Rupali also spoke about how her parents are 'very protective' of her, especially her mother. Like many parents of Teach-Them fellows, they grudgingly accepted her choice to join the fellowship on the promise that it would lead to solid career prospects. It was difficult for Rupali to then tell them she would be taking the even more precarious career move of launching a not-for-profit start-up:

... whenever I've had to take risks like telling my parents 'I'm not doing my Master's, I don't know when my salary is going to come, you're going to have to support me, I'm starting an NGO', it has always been very uncomfortable, and it has never been my instinct.

Rupali completed her Teach-Them fellowship in Delhi between 2017 – 2019, but unlike other Teach-Them alumni, she founded her NGO during the first six months of her fellowship. As well as co-founder, Rupali is also Prashant's romantic partner.

I introduce Rupali here because she articulates how *resilience* is a key trait of an idealised purposed-leader. More specifically, Rupali's example of what resilience looks like in young leaders directly reveals two things: 1) how Teach-Them's values can sit in contradistinction to those of their pupils' families, 2) that Rupali, like Prashant, tells stories about how SEL can benefit children as a way to psychologically process difficult experiences in her own childhood.

## Resilience and purposed-leadership

The below interview took place at Rupali's home in a wealthy enclave of South Delhi, the same residential area in which the Clear-Space office is housed. Rupali's home also doubles as the office for Kshamta. After spending about an hour discussing Rupali's childhood, her life volunteering for NGOs during university, and early experiences of founding the start-up, I ask her more about her vision for Kshamta:

Me: So, Kshamta: where is it going for you, what do you want it to be doing?

Rupali: Two things, at least that I'm extremely passionate about: First, understanding, or transforming, how people look at success in a child's life .... We want to bring attention to what really matters: that if a child is resilient, if a child knows who they are, then conventional learning would make more sense in a child's life because they know what they are learning and why they are learning it.

Second, we want to contribute in terms of research, there's lots of buzz around SEL because of the Happiness Curriculum ... but it doesn't change the fact that in every village of India ASER tells us how many kids can read, but not how many kids are resilient – or even Teach-Them, I don't know how many kids will be able to stand up to their parents in 12th grade and say: I need to study English – so you need to give me 5000 rupees per year for my college fee.

Rupali has worked as a Teach-Them fellow and Teach-Them fellows are directed to use English as the sole language of pedagogical instruction in government schools where all other lessons and teachers operate in the main regional native language.<sup>75</sup> In Teach-Them logic, English-medium teaching helps children of low-income communities feel psychologically empowered and professionally skilled enough to gain access to high quality colleges and higher-paid jobs.

By referring to the pan-India Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), Rupali compares the lack of SEL in villages to the fact that 'even Teach-Them' have not succeeded in inculcating the skill of 'resilience' in the children they teach. Even in Grade 12, she says (the last year of secondary school), children who have been taught by Teach-Them fellows for the past six or

---

<sup>75</sup> For a thorough exploration of what it means for schooling in north India to be provided in Hindi and/or English, see Chaise La Douza's *Hindi is our ground, English is our sky* (2014).

seven years are not ‘able’ to ‘stand up’ to their parents and demand that these parents pay for their college education.

Through her speech, Rupali recategorizes an abstract psychological condition (resilience) into an ‘ability’ that can be used to support oneself when one must argue one’s case. Although Rupali doesn’t present it as such, I read the school graduate’s financial dispute with her parents as a clash of values. For Rupali, there is no question whether it is ethically right for the child to ask her parents for money for college, the focus is on whether she has the ‘resilience’ to do so. As explored in Chapter 1, Teach-Them fellows are expected to teach leadership. In the story above, the girl has come to value her own personal education over her parents’ values, which Rupali reads as a sign she is becoming a purposed-leader. The parents clearly want to use the money in other ways, perhaps for wedding gifts for family marriages (as suggested by other anthropologists: e.g. Grover (2018))– or maybe, as was common in my time in Delhi, to buy a smart phone.

What some family members of the girl might see as pure insolence – a child demanding money from their parents for something they desire individually – Rupali sees as resilience. In Teach-Them speak, the child has ‘located’ her own values: she values ‘education’. But hidden within the value of ‘education’ which Teach-Them explicitly promote is the valuing of purposed-leadership: the girl doesn’t just value any education, she values one which she has decided upon – learning English. By demanding this, the girl shows herself to be an incredibly driven individual who trusts her own beliefs and has the ‘resilience’ not to be persuaded by others.

But there is more here. I read Rupali’s description of this girl who can’t stand up to her parents as a vicarious projection of herself onto the life of her imagined protégé. Rupali tells a story of the girl who Teach-Them failed, the girl who Teach-Them did not manage to teach to be resilient, and therefore who must end her education at the end of grade 12, the very point in her life when Teach-Them no longer have direct access to her. In this story, Rupali’s social-emotional learning program will eventually teach resilience to every child in India, and in doing so, Rupali can enjoy a certain psycho-emotional form of success: she can feel proud that she was the leader who ensured women could stand up to their parents and make their own choices in life. She can enjoy a vicarious sort of emancipation.

I aim to make clear the conception of self that lies in the valuing of resilience as Teach-Them alumni seem to see it: it is a self conceptualised as ‘autonomous’, a self that carries a purpose ‘within’. But in my reading, the girl above does not value her own English-based education simply because she has located this value for herself. Instead, she has been shaped by Teach-Them fellows to value herself as an individual purposed-leader who must self-actualise by meeting her own ‘innermost desires’ – even if those ‘inner’ desires are simply representations of Teach-Them’s belief in the value of English. As we see in this story, this new value of autonomy creates friction against the values of her parents – a friction which might prove more dangerous to low-income families than the middle-class families from which Teach-Them fellows are drawn.

In the final section of the chapter, we return to Prashant and observe his attempts to teach purposed-leadership to a group of boys from lower-income families. Just as Rupali imagines what liberation might occur if all girls could stand up to their parents, Prashant inspires the boys to ignore their concerns about money and employment by following their dreams in the name of self-actualisation and social change.

## Teaching purposed-leadership

### **The Warren and the Tomb: non-government schools and government primaries**

If entering a government primary school in Delhi feels a little like a military parade ground, then visiting an NGO-sponsored/low-fee private school is like going down the rabbit hole. Here I’ve bundled up NGO-run schools that don’t charge fees with low-income private schools that do. This is because for the purposes of my comparison, NGO schools and low-fee private schools are similar enough: both occupy a land area about one tenth the size of government schools.

The largest asset of government schools in Delhi is space. Questions about toilets, teaching and learning, hierarchy, NGO partnership and the patronage of School Inspectors aside – Delhi government primary schools in south Delhi sit comfortably within walled, tree-filled compounds. Before public-private partnerships between the state and NGOs, primary schools

in south Delhi had suffered a steady decline in enrolment – as I detail in my Introduction. It is perhaps a combination of the architecture and bureaucratic structure that informs the languorous attitude of many government teachers in Delhi. Things are what they are, are what they've been, and are what they will be. Arushi once showed me a spreadsheet listing the dates of retirement of all our schoolteachers, dates stamped into the future with a permanence that seem to exceed both the spreadsheet software that carried it and the laptop hardware in which it was enshrined. Time really is different in these schools; the eternal is palpable.

Considering this image, it is not hard to see why entrepreneurial educators in Delhi have traditionally had little to do with government schools. Indeed, Baan and other entrepreneurs of educators would periodically kick themselves for choosing to run an NGO aimed at partnering with the government. Entrepreneurs live on the thrill and speed of trial and error – the 'move fast and break things' of Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg; NGO schools can open and close in the time it takes for the government to allocate an unfilled post in one of their under-staffed institutions.<sup>76</sup> If Delhi's government primary schools suffer the slow grind of Indian bureaucracy (Jeffrey 2010), NGO/low-fee ones represent the buzzing hive of an entrepreneurial start-up.

It was no surprise that it was 'Prem Sir', the head of an NGO school in Delhi's satellite town of Noida, that was the first to accept Kshamta's proposal of partnership and their offer to teach SEL. As a social entrepreneur trying to improve his NGO school by whatever means possible, Prem Sir clearly saw a spark in Prashant that he thought worth investing in. Indeed, as Prashant says about the principal, 'Prem sir as a person is an entrepreneur.'

I've reflected on architecture of government schools above to emphasise the contrast to their non-government funded counterparts, one of which is the setting for the following lengthy vignette, in which Prashant's own entrepreneurialism feels matched by the throbbing potential of bodies packed between its sweating walls.

---

<sup>76</sup> See footnote in Chapter 1 for Delhi's lack of teachers



### Down the rabbit hole with Prashant

Whenever I enter a low-income *basti*<sup>77</sup> for the first time, I feel like I'm falling down a slide. I step off the main road and into the shaded, wire-covered alleys, and suddenly the walls and people around me draw me forward with their current. Normally I'm there to visit a school, and I'm following a local who knows where they are going. But this time it's Prashant – and as it's his first visit too – he seems as lost as me. I subconsciously step over dogs or smile at vegetable sellers; this is not too different to the higher-income neighbourhood where I have been living – just that there's much less space. Prashant and I arrive at a metal door and stand on a grate above an open drain, the bridge and moat that protect this sequestered NGO school from the traffic of cows and rickshaws in the gully. The door swings open and a smiling frenetic woman ushers us in.

As I enter the school building the feeling of rabbit-hole intensifies. If the government schools mirror the grand *makbare* [tombs] built for the Mughal king Humayun in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, then this has the feeling of the vaulted *durgar* [mausoleum] that developed in the hidden lanes nearby, a shrine for the Sufi saint Nizamuddin who lived three hundred years earlier. The former can be taken in *tout court*, the latter requires a guide and a stomach for small spaces. The architecture is like a termite's nest, with all the industry, energy, and frugality that the image suggests.<sup>78</sup> A tiny skylight, four-floors up, illuminates the galleries of classrooms in tiers above. Fans whir, feet shuffle, and I look down to see they are my own. Prashant and I are guided into a classroom and I realise I haven't been listening to a word our host has said. The building has swallowed me and I am consumed, feeling the verb in all its double meaning: lost in the stomach of a living, breathing monster, absorbed in the potential of how these sticky rooms are hotbeds for ground-up social change.

---

<sup>77</sup> 'slum'

<sup>78</sup> It has been suggested to me that to compare the population of this school to insects echoes colonial representations of India as underdeveloped and unclean. I recognise the danger of orientalism and classism here, but I use the metaphor in post-humanist admiration for how other creatures build community.

**Prashant's Speech: the ethics of biography as parable**

*A note on method: One aim of this thesis is to experiment with both the practice and writing of ethnography. With this in mind, the below section retains the feel of the notebook in which my in-situ observations were written. I leave in my own doubts and researcher foibles to remind the reader of my fallibility, and to invite the doubt of the reader into the conversation. On this, the below conversation between Prashant and the schoolboys took place 90% in Hindi, with English words scattered about as is common with the Hinglish widely spoken in Delhi. This conversation happened in my final month of fieldwork, at which point my comprehension of basic spoken Hindi was good, but not fluent. Considering much of what Prashant said he had already told me in English, I was able to follow the conversation quite closely.*

We enter the classroom and into the gaze of a huddle of young men. The average age, probably fourteen. The woman explains that Prashant is here from Kshamta, that he will give a small speech, or something of the sort: I missed the introduction because I was trying to work out the age of the kids and the social position of the handful of attending adults. Luckily, Prashant had already filled me in on the taxi ride over: A gender-focused NGO had been running a short intervention in the school to host two reflection spaces – one for boys, one for girls – that helped students challenge their assumptions about gender. Prashant is to give a keynote speech to the boys to mark the course's completion – but he hasn't prepared anything and plans to 'wing it'. He begins by asking the boys a question:

*Kids, what do you want to be?*

The boys take turns to deliver their answers. From what I manage to note down, the most popular answers, in descending order, are: soldier, navy, police, engineer, scientist, cricketer singer, and teacher. In the taxi after leaving school, Prashant ranted his disappointment at these answers: he complained that these were stock examples that the students aren't really that passionate about.<sup>79</sup> Most of the above positions are institutional, governmental, and provide

---

<sup>79</sup> It is interesting to compare Prashant's focus on passion with the theory of change CEO Kishore Biyani uses to describe what it takes to succeed in India. As quoted by Nandini Gooptu, he said, '... to conquer one's dream one only needs passion' (Gooptu 2013b:2).

people from lower caste and class background the chance for some social mobility. Prashant, however, see these roles as neither personally ambitious, nor good for social change – they won't help children become entrepreneurial citizens or value purposed-leadership.

Next, Prashant begins telling the boys his own life story. He talks about his parents. How they tried many businesses, but most failed. His grandfather was on the board of a top-end private school, so he got admission even though his parents couldn't afford the fees.

I watch the boys and wonder what they are thinking. For me, wrapped up in theories of social and cultural capital and my ethnographic notes on Prashant, I am struck by this reference to his family. It at once marks Prashant as coming from a different social class as the boys – his grandfather is on the board of an elite private school – and also makes him more relatable: his parents have also struggled with money. Elsewhere, while promoting Kshamta on social media, Prashant identifies himself as a ‘child of adversity’. Of course, in terms of his material and social capital, Prashant is more privileged than the boys to which he speaks – but within Prashant’s subjective experience, the experience he has been taught to foreground within Teach-Them’s theory of self, Prashant *feels* underprivileged. In subjective experience, privilege is relative, and so Prashant sees no ethical problem with associating his own life story to that of the boys.

Meanwhile, Prashant is speaking about his first job. He didn't go to college, he explains, and instead joined a tech start-up. He begged for a job and said he'd even sweep and mop the floors for a chance to work there. He was offered an unpaid internship, and after a year or two, the start-up offered him a salary. He refused. At this point, one teenager bursts out with a question, his tone flooded with excitement:

Boy: What salary? How much did they offer you?

Prashant: It's not important, it's just a number

Boy (and the rest of the room):

Prashant: ... but it was 7 lakh [£7000] per month

While I take a minute to convert this into pounds, the room sits and digests the actions of this madman. The average family salary for the boys in the room is probably between 1 and 2 lakh a year. Prashant, of course, knows they will be shocked by his refusal to take the money, and I wonder whether he's overstating the figure for dramatic effect. Prashant pushes on. Money's 'not important', he says, 'I wanted to learn'. Prashant repeats how he didn't go to college and was looking for learning opportunities everywhere. He explains – using Hindi phrases that I don't fully catch the meaning of – that he got a chance to travel abroad to Czech Republic. And then, 'When I came back, I thought, what more do I want to learn? Language was one, so I went to learn French. Arts was another, so I did a creative writing course.'

It seems Prashant's aim here is to inspire the teenagers with the passion to learn. Prashant's appetite for learning is a key element of his self-image. As we know, curiosity is a key value of the Happiness Curriculum and Clear-Space's Student Vision, both inspired by the 4Cs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills movement – which, if we recall – involves giving children entrepreneurial skills that help them navigate the growing neoliberal flexibility/precarity of the labour market.

Prashant is now speaking about the beginning of Kshamta. He says that he began by asking himself about the 'real purpose' of education. 'Is it to get jobs?', he wonders out loud, 'Or is it to tell stories, to help kids understand themselves better?' He must have gone on to explain a bit about SELin schools, because the next thing I note is Prashant telling the boys that he took the idea of Kshamta to 80 schools, when eventually Prem Sir said 'yes'. He tells the boys, 'We wanted to help kids think about how they treat each other'.

At this point, something must have triggered me, because I wrote this question in my notebook:

*Is it dangerous to offer such dreams to these kids? Can it harm them?*

Perhaps I was beginning to worry at the didacticism of Prashant's story. I felt, in that moment, that he was telling the kids that the responsibility to live their dreams is theirs and theirs only. I certainly wasn't worried that the kids would get more time in school to 'think about how they treat each other', because I agree with such a move. Instead, I was worried that these kids would follow Prashant's advice too closely, that they would look for work in something they love only to either (a) not find it and become disheartened, or (b) find it and realise it doesn't

pay the salary they need to support their family. I was worried that Prashant's speech was distracting the kids from the real difference between the lifestyle opportunities that are available to Prashant and the lifestyle opportunities that are available to them. I had already formed a view of Prashant, and had decided two things:

One, Prashant comes from a world of replete social capital, and it was this social capital that (a) opened the door to an internship at a start-up and (b) got him a place on a cultural exchange to Czech Republic. It was also this social capital, perhaps, that gave him the confidence to enrol on a creative writing course at the British Council despite his lack of suitability. He chuckled when he told me that he got on the course despite having 'never even read one book'.

Two, Prashant has a capacity for exceptionally hard work in things he's interested in. He has, what he himself calls, a 'sharp' mind, and learns incredibly quickly. A few hours after this speech at the school, I saw his mind in action as he gave Rupali feedback on how to design a funding pitch. He looked at the slide, analysed how best to explain it to an audience of potential benefactors, and modelled it for us. It was clear and attractive and made me want to invest in him.

My worry, sitting cross-legged in a packed classroom of boys who lack Prashant's connections, was that Prashant was universalising his specific experience into a set of rules and practices that others should follow. I wondered: what happens if all these children hold purposed-leadership as their salient value? Will it truly benefit the low-income communities they come from?

The answer, according to a recent ethnography by Ajanta Subramanian (2019), is no. Based on fieldwork within India's prestigious IIT higher education network, she argues that the 'hope for meritocracy as the transcendence of identity is a profoundly ahistorical aspiration that works against the actual redress of inequality' (A. Subramanian 2019:5). Prashant adopts a similarly ahistorical, future-focused conception of social relations where hierarchical markers such as gender and caste have no impact on one's material and social prosperity. Prashant operates with a pre-figurative method of social change: if we tell ourselves that only our will, determination, and creativity matter, then it will be so. Subramanian's work reminds us how dangerous the value of meritocracy is to those who it promises most.

### Prashant's philosophy of self-reliance

Let's return to Prashant in action, and how it made me feel uncomfortable. In the final part of his speech Prashant asks the kids about *pareshan*, a Hindi term that I translate as 'trouble, worry, anxiety, problems'.

Prashant: *Pareshan* happens everywhere, but what is common to all places?

Boy 1: People

Boy 2: Discrimination

Boy 3: *Pareshan* itself

Prashant: You

Prashant's point here seems clear: you can't change the circumstances around you, the only thing you can change is you. Let me examine Prashant's philosophy a little. First, it draws heavily on the philosophy and politics of M. K. Gandhi.<sup>80</sup> The village immersion where Prashant had his revelation about joining the social sector was facilitated by the NGO which Govind – Baan's 'angel' from Chapter 3 – is the head of. Both Govind and the NGO hold Gandhi's philosophy of self-change-as-service at the core of their operations and beliefs. Furthermore, Gandhi's philosophy intersects neatly with the lessons taught at the Landmark Forum that we explored in the Arushi section of Chapter 2. For Arushi, Suraj needs to recognise that it is *his* problem if he won't speak up in meetings, not the fault of the group for making him feel insecure.

Similarly, Prashant tells the boys that the trouble they feel is *their* trouble, and it is up to them to deal with. According to the Theravada Buddhist teachings I was taught during a Vipassana meditation retreat (a retreat recommended to me by Teach-Them alumni): humans cannot stop themselves from feeling pain, but they do have the power to choose whether to react to that pain. This Buddhist self-reliance seems relevant to the philosophy of self that structures both Arushi's coaching and Prashant's speech. For these Buddhists, the world outside is

---

<sup>80</sup> See Irani (2019:75-78) both on Gandhi's influence on the IERM, and how Bill Drayton's global nonprofit, Ashoka, uses Gandhi to legitimise their own work for social change.

uncontrollable and will always induce suffering if you let it. Instead, you must learn to notice emotions as they come and decide not to react, because reaction will cause further suffering – to you, or others.

Certain educators in Delhi seem to align in part with this Buddhist theory, even as other discourses – such as the pressure to be an autonomous, active, enterprising citizen – pull against it. For Arushi and Prashant, a person must not let the opinions of others in the outside (social) world determine one's sense of self-worth and self-confidence; each individual must recognise they can tell a different story about who they are, and then begin to perform that story. This is what Arushi recommends to Suraj as she coaches him to be a purposed-leader, and Prashant too is teaching purposed-leadership by offering this philosophy of self-reliance. But whereas in vipassana the student is taught to *not* react to the sensations of pain experienced, the purposed-leader is meant to use their inner sensations as the guide for *how to act on and change the world*.

Prashant – like most of the Teach-Them alumni in his professional circle – does not conceptually foreground how social and historical conditions structure subjectivity. He recognises that he had privilege, but does not see his social capital, caste status, and family money as the main causes of his success as a social entrepreneur. He does not ask: what are the historical and social conditions that landed me in an elite private school, and these boys in a low-income private school? Subjectivity, for Prashant, is wholly within the aegis of the subject. It is this mindset that leads Prashant to operate with an approach to the human condition as 'autonomous' similar to Teach-Them:

Prashant: Yes, there's a lot of *pareshan* in our world, but what can our contribution be? Everything is bad in the world, but what can we change? We can change ourselves.

This is the Gandhian call for self-change-as-social-change: each of us must 'contribute' to the world in some way, and the most efficient way of doing this is changing oneself. To 'change ourselves' is not just *for* ourselves, it is in itself a 'contribution' to improving the well-being of others. This is the same logic that informs Teach-Them alumni social entrepreneur Himali whom we met in Chapter 1: even if structural change is important, it's easier for *individuals* to commit to self-change. But is it really? We saw in Chapter 3 how difficult it is for Baan to

develop a self that is both ethical and professionally successful. He attempts to account for himself using the same quantitative methods he uses to judge both his staff and the education outcomes of his NGO – but this method fails to provide solace. Prashant, like Divya in Chapter 2, values self-reliance – and just as Divya teaches this method obliquely through Clear-Space’s Student Vision, Prashant teaches it directly to his captive teenage audience. If we see Prashant’s philosophy of self as founded on the value of self-reliance, it does indeed seem hypocritical. At critical junctures in Prashant’s life he has relied on the generosity of others to meet his needs: he has received school fees, job opportunities, and international travel through social connections he inherited by virtue of birth.

But regardless of whether low-income families will benefit from their children learning to value purposed-leadership, valuing purposed-leadership causes problems even for the entrepreneurs who promote it.

Practising purposed-leadership can lead people into self-contradiction in a world in which social conditions prevent them from realising their ethical aims, ultimately leading to feelings of low self-worth, and in some cases the failure of the social enterprises they are working to promote. In a bid to understand their failure, they practice relentless self-appraisal. The pressure to find clarity in the self as the source of success produces collateral effects. For example, it seems to draw an educator like Prashant to reduce his message into narrow moralism, as we see below. Indeed, it is in moments of affective intensity where this tension of the social entrepreneur becomes most visible. In his speech to the boys, Prashant is out of his comfort zone: he is not a trained teacher and lacks skill in creating a nurturing learning environment. But his passion for education is unbridled, and so – at a stretch, in the tension of affective intensity – he begins to simplify the message he wants to transmit, and jettisons some of the values of SEL in the process.

### **The moralism produced by desiring purposed-leadership**

At one point in his speech, Prashant directs the boys to ‘*Bina soche pucho!*’ [Just ask without thinking!]. What is suggested here is that the boys should not worry if their question sounds selfish or petty but should instead trust their own judgement. And yet in the above vignette we see Prashant dismiss a boy’s question about Prashant’s potential salary as ‘not important’.



This is contradictory: Prashant at once wants boys to ask questions without thinking but also to employ the discernment to avoid questions that Prashant deems irrelevant. Prashant produces this double-bind, I argue, because he is trying to teach two very different things simultaneously. In his aim to practice the tenets of SEL, Prashant wants to hold space for ‘curiosity’, but in his desire to inspire the boys with a belief in purposed-leadership he – like Teach-Them – circumscribes what should be valued.

Here, Prashant falls back on the didactic moralism which structures the conception of his own life purpose: thou must contribute to social change, and the way you contribute is ‘asking your own questions’, not those influenced by the society around you. For Prashant, the boy’s interest in money – displayed by asking about his salary – is a value the boy has learnt from the low-income community in which he lives – and not his ‘own’ value. In this way, Prashant’s behaviour mirrors that of Arushi mother-coaching Suraj. If Arushi enjoyed the fantasy of self-actualisation by practising purposed-leadership through mother-coaching, perhaps Prashant is enjoying the same. He is enjoying replacing the parents of these boys and becoming the inspirational father he wished for when he was a child.

In the intensity of his desire to teach purposed-leadership, Prashant reneges on the value of ‘curiosity’ outlined in the Happiness Curriculum in favour of a moral didacticism that prescribes and circumscribes what the teenagers are and are not allowed to desire – just as Teach-Them does to fellows at the training Centre.

Here, in a bid to dislodge them from the values and concerns of their local community, he ignores how delicately these boys’ lives are wrapped up in the reality of caste.

Boy:               What work did you do in the UK? You said you wouldn’t mind doing sweeping and mopping, did you really do this work?

P:                 I didn’t, but I would, it’s not a big deal

But for the families of these schoolboys, it may well be a big deal. From my observations, those from lower caste communities who are employed as domestic workers or cleaners in offices strictly distinguish between what work they do and don’t do. Who is meant to clean what is

organised into a very specific caste-based system in the parts of Northern India I've visited. So, for a privately educated Brahmin like Prashant to say he 'wouldn't mind doing sweeping' may well shock the boys. And this is Prashant's intention. He wants the boys to dismiss that which is valued in their own communities and begin a journey towards a grander *sewa* [service] one in which the transformation of their own desires transforms themselves, and by proxy the world that they are in.

Boy:            You went to UK at 17?

P:              Yes

Boy:            What all did you see in the UK?

P:              That's off topic. Yes, I saw fancy things, but it's not important. Delhi has many great things ... Why is it a big thing to travel? You can travel in India.

Here, Prashant dismisses an opportunity to facilitate a conversation about desire, an act of social-emotional learning, in favour of imposing his view that international travel is petty compared to the value of social change. But this is Prashant at his most hypocritical, because – as he told me in our interviews – it was exactly his experience meeting Europeans at the exchange event in Czech Republic that led him to 'question dogma' and seek out arts education opportunities for adults. He *did* learn something new from travel. I sympathise with Prashant here though, because I understand Prashant's desire to warn the kids away from unrealistic dreams which likely to lead to disappointment – even if he simultaneously promotes unrealistic dreams of success through self-knowing and utter determination.

After the questions about foreign travel, the kids probe Prashant about his emotions. This is an ideal opportunity to practice the openness and vulnerability which SEL curriculums promote. But again, Prashant misses his chance:

Boy:            How did you feel when schools rejected you? Was there struggle ...

P:              We *all* have struggles, rich people and poor ...

Why doesn't Prashant talk more candidly about the pain he felt at that rejection? In our private interviews he willingly recounted how he suffered – so why not here, with the very kids to

whom he is hoping to inspire with the values of the Happiness Curriculum? Of course, it is much easier to be vulnerable in a private one-on-one than in a room full of strangers, but there is more at play. Prashant is more interested in proselytising the theory of individualised self-reliance that structures purposed-leadership than he is in leveraging opportunities to practice empathy.

Let me clear before I go on. Prashant is aware that he's not very good at engaging with children, indeed he told me as much in the taxi ride home after this school visit. Prashant is not a teacher. He has never trained with Teach-Them or completed any other teacher training. This weakness is clear enough in the way he fields the questions of the boys in front of him. But Prashant still uses the opportunity of the speech to teach the boys: he simply chooses to promote purposed-leadership and the philosophy that underpins it rather than SEL.

By using his own story as exemplar, he shows how his choices to follow unconventional learning opportunities (working in a start-up, doing creative writing) have led him to become a successful social entrepreneur. Instead of seeking money and status through institutional affiliation, he has chosen to change himself. One thing that Prashant has not learnt is the fragility of his universalist theory of human subjectivity: he has not understood how structural subjectification influences an individual's capacity to imagine what they can and can't do.

### **Prashant's philosophy of self**

Prashant himself has relied on one key value for his psychological fortification through a life in which he has felt undervalued: self-belief. For Prashant, this has also been one of the most difficult states of mind to cultivate. By sitting in front of these boys and teaching purposed-leadership, Prashant fertilises his own self-belief. By announcing his own *pareshan* [trouble], he speaks himself into a position in which he has conquered it.

I would go further and claim that it is Prashant's practising of purposed-leadership that has helped him develop a 'self'. For Prashant, you can only gain self-belief once you have shaken off the idea that you must follow a lifepath that has been prescribed by the social and institutional structures around you. The self emerges once you picture yourself as separate from the expectations of parents, teachers, community leaders, and political ideology. This does not

mean Prashant is not interested in community or family, as we saw in the poem, he like Divya, believes ‘Asian people have...this concept of interconnectedness, [and] a very strong sense of family’. But this interconnectedness does not, for Prashant, equate with intersubjectivity. Instead, the self will not appear until you *will* it. The self must be created, and it is created by self-change. As he proclaims to the boys towards the end of his speech: ‘Changing yourself is the hardest thing.’

Similar to how Teach-Them induce fellows to both discover their own values *and* adopt those prescribed at the training Centre, Prashant purportedly expects these boys to both accept his theory of self-reliant, self-made subjectivity, and develop their own individualised path. My argument is that Teach-Them and Prashant both perform an authoritative act of worlding which circumscribes the conceptual framework in which a self must become a purposed-leader. Fellows and children must accept without question a theory of human subjectivity that is not bound to the social and historical context in which it was formed, i.e., that is not sociologically structural. They must instead embrace a universalist theory of the human condition in which historical and cultural differences are flattened out and the essential human *will* can propel a subject forward through life. This ‘will’ conquers any latent culturally-learned values and replaces them with both a conception of individualised human subjectivity and with the value of purposed-leadership at the helm. One’s purpose must align with that of the Teach-Them education movement, and one must fuel and renew this purpose through the thrill and satisfaction of being a leader.

### **Conclusion: the tension of the social-entrepreneur**

In this chapter I provide a narrative of Prashant’s life to show that there are social and psychological origins to Prashant’s motivation to run an educational organisation that promotes SEL. This is important as it stands in contradistinction to how Teach-Them posit the development of motivation, i.e., as something inherent inside oneself that one must discover.

Prashant wants to imagine that these boys desire for social change lies dormant inside them, and that his speech only works to reveal it to them. And yet, in the frustrated affective intensity of the setting, he shifts more and more towards a moral discourse that gives the boys the ethical ‘answer’: valuing money is wrong, international travel is unimportant, caste is unimportant,

and changing oneself is all that matters. But this is exactly the tension of the social entrepreneur – where the desire to do ‘good’ meets the start-up logic of quick, measurable growth. As Prashant story reveals, it is social entrepreneurs who so often find themselves in moments of affective intensity that induce them to promote narrowly imagined ‘solutions’ to complex social problems.

In his speech to the boys, Prashant – like Baan, Divya and Arushi – ends up working against the success of his own education NGO. In his desire for purposed-leadership, he has become the educationalist moralist who the government official ‘thrashed’ for trying to make the Happiness Curriculum into a tool for moral education – a figure who Prashant himself derides.

Part of the reason Prashant teaches morals instead of facilitating SEL is because he is not used to being in the classroom and responding to the nature of a child’s questions. Prashant has jumped into the world of entrepreneurial education reform with even less knowledge and training than those who’ve completed Teach-Them’s five-week training Centre. He may have his ambitions to change the whole of Indian education provision through SEL, but as we see in the interaction with the very boys who are his targets, his anxiety to proselytise the revolutionary ideal of the self-as-locus-of-social-change trumps his patience to learn how to facilitate social-emotional learning.

If Arushi – with her role as School Leader – is the NGO educationalist closest to the site of intervention of education reform, then Prashant – with his transcendental dreams of introducing the theory of self-as-locus-of-social-change – is the furthest. For Prashant, his desire to ensure the boys devote themselves to social change obscures the individual differences of each and flattens their personalities into the subject position of minion for the cause. The desire for purposed-leadership draws individuals away from the immediate experience of seeing children learn, a distance which distorts their ability to view what their grands designs for education policy change hope to achieve.

## *Post-Script: how I want what they have ...*

\*

The central argument of my thesis is that – for all their talk of values – these educators value something called ‘purposed-leadership’ above all else, and without full recognition of how this value guides their actions. It is easy enough for me to sit behind my desk, comb through my notes, and ‘discover’ this transcendental value of purposed-leadership because I am writing an Anthropology PhD thesis that requires me to do so. I sat there, examining ethnographic objects, one by one, and looking for patterns that linked them. The best pattern I could find was how the discourse of teaching ethics and values was haunted by the spectre of purposed-leadership.

But I do not feel comfortable examining my four main research participants without a little self-examination of my own. In the section below, I present moments during fieldwork when I was in a state of affective intensity, in which I desired or valued disparate things at once, and in which I wanted to have what my educator friends seemed to have. Let me begin and let the ethnography do the talking:

### **Moment A: Arushi’s resilience**

It’s 11am and I already feel dirty in my sweat-stained orange kurta. I’ve spent break time listening to Divansh tell stories about dinosaurs in Hindi, part relieved I didn’t get roped into any outdoor games with the kids, part grumpy that I chose to come to school instead of arranging an interview in some air-conditioned NGO office. Before the break I observed Tricia teach a rather uninspirational phonics lesson to a bunch of seven-year-olds, uninspirational not due to Tricia’s pedagogy, but because the video material is designed for native English speakers, especially kids in the UK who might have more of a chance relating to the Clicking Castanets drill for the letter ‘C’. Tricia is now doing something on her laptop – I want to be interested but I’m not. Kasak is leading her Class 1 kids to wash their hands, Suraj isn’t here today, and the desire to catch teachers for an ethnographically valuable after-school chat is quickly losing ground to my wish to ride home and watch *Peaky Blinders* beneath a frosty A/C. As I begin to develop an excuse for why I’m leaving early (not that I need one, the mysterious

schedule of the anthropologist is a godsend) I see a smile break out on Tricia's face and a shadow cover the door.

Arushi has arrived. Her smile beams double as wide as Tricia's. She tells of her early start getting her daughter Ananya ready, her frustrating meeting with Divya at the office, and what she's got planned for our day at school. Meanwhile, I'm deep in the middle of a religious experience. Perhaps it's the heat and humidity, or an oncoming bout of Dengue, or perhaps it's the power of the woman herself: I am in awe. I simply cannot understand where she gets her energy from. I sloped out of bed at 8am, gobbled some of last night's dinner for breakfast and then two cups of chai while the kids did assembly. Arushi looks like she's just got back from a week-long spa retreat. She sits down with me to ask about progress with my drama teaching, how the Class 3 kids are responding to my lessons, and what she can do to help. I feel carried. I feel inspired. It was the moment of my fieldwork when I felt I truly understood, affectively, both the concepts of 'resilience' and 'leadership'. I wanted the resilience that Arushi showed in coming to school each day. Because today was no anomaly. This was how Arushi arrived at school 99 days out of 100. The moment continues to sit with me now, over 18-months later, writing in a café in London. I still fantasise about showing that kind of resilience: how is it possible to be a single mother, negotiate the politics of the organisation, and retain such fervour and good humour during sweaty days at school? My thesis has explored how the purposed-leadership Arushi values needs to be unpacked and explored in order to understand how it might end up influencing the children who are expected to learn it, but this says nothing of my desire to have the resilience Arushi shows in her work, and it still mesmerises me.

### **Moment B: Divya's role**

It's a pleasant October morning and I'm one of the first to arrive at the Clear-Space offices for Divya's 'Ideal School Day' game. I sit on the terrace with tea and a banana, enjoying the novelty of sitting outside without sweating. Divya arrives excitedly, if a little late, and leads the team out of the office and into a nearby park. We stand in a circle as Divya explains in English our first task: find something in the park, notice what you have in common with it, and notice how it helps you. My experience of the game is documented in the photo below.

THINGS IN NATURE	THINGS WE HAVE IN COMMON	HOW IT HELPS ME
Bird poo	we are sitting on this bench	Abstract shape reminds me to stay imaginative
Ants per pe upper - niche chal rahi hai	we both have work to do	Reminds to keep going + work as a team
Bright fresh flowers	Try to stand out	They're more beautiful when they're together
Butterfly	Float through life trying new places to be	Reminds me to ride the wind
Tanger, mitchy Jay	work in same school	
Sunlight	potential to illuminate	Reminds to me be calm

Example of reflective practice

personal / holistic reflection (in a professional environment i.e. or)

Just as we're about to begin, two latecomers enter the park. Baan suggests that I explain the task to them, but this time in Hindi. At this point I've been in the school for six months and my Hindi has improved. I feel proud to be accepted as part of this bilingual team.

After the reflection exercise, we return to the office for chai. Divya splits us up into groups where we are tasked with tangram riddles which can only be solved when we work collectively as a team. Next, Divya places a set of inspirational photos around the room. She asks us to



peruse the gallery and choose the photo that we most connect to and that most inspires us to work in school.



This is the photo that I chose, along with Kasak, Arushi and Tricia. Other popular choices included a woman putting a flower in a soldier's gun and a Buddhist monk sitting next to a tiger.

As much as my day at Divya's workshop was spent writing notes, it was also a chance for me to genuinely reflect on what it is that inspired me to explore schooling and teaching as forms of hope and/or oppression. This was a day to imagine an ideal school, and after the tiring reality of the Delhi primary school where I spent most days, the break was welcome. It was on this day that I felt envy for Divya's position as Schools Director. It was her job to keep Clear-Space staff motivated in their work. It was her job to design games and exercises that remind us how nature is our teacher, how there is always more to learn about collaboration, and that soppy moments of imagining our inner child (as in the photo above) are valuable and important, their sentimentality notwithstanding.

I crave a role like Divya's. I desire to lead a team of young people to question and inspire their relationship to teaching and learning and I want to be followed like Divya is followed.

### **Moment C: Baan's access and power**

A weekday evening in September. I'm stood in the small kitchen of the Teach-Them office, filling up bottles of water with Shivanshu, the Teach-Them Alumni Officer, before we head into the third Social Entrepreneur Circle. He's talking about a dinner he is organising for Teach-Them alumni entrepreneurs and HNIs (High Net-Worth Individuals). He's invited Baan and a few other people I know. I hint at that I'd love to attend and Shivanshu carefully denies my request by way of explaining how he's already struggling to keep the numbers down. The HNIs only want to speak to people who are really 'doing something'. I feel a bitterness in my stomach. Who are these rich businessmen to decide who is really 'doing something'? Why do they get to decide the fate of education development in India? My mind flicks back to the Circle I hosted a month back, the one in which Baan defended his ethics by announcing how much money he had raised for his organisation. I wanted to sit next to Baan and some HNI at that dinner and talk about the politics of these education start-ups, talk about what kinds of humans they were trying to make. I didn't want to be left out.

Six months later and I'm sat at Teach-Them's annual children's showcase event, a three-day conference where children from around India meet business and political bigwigs to show off how well Teach-Them fellows have taught them in school. It's the opening night, and two t-shirt clad tweenagers are hosting the event, compering between acts with scripted English interactions which fail to display the acting talent I'm sure they would have in Hindi. I'm there with my partner – Evaara – who is also a Teach-Them alumni. She scolds me for sitting next to the Chief Operating Officer of Teach-Them, a man I hadn't met before, because, 'now we can't talk about how bad the show is!'. After an hour I'm ready to leave, for me the performance is an act of corporate prostitution: it is designed to sell Teach-Them as a progressive miracle organisation where poor urban kids become fluent in English in three short years and are all set to drag their families out of poverty with their first big pay cheque from KPMG. Evaara holds my arm: she too wants to leave but feels for the kids on stage. The next act has us both regretting our choice. Luminaries of education development in India are invited to form a panel on stage, one of which is Ashish Dhawan. He is the founder and head of Central Square

Foundation, an organisation funded by his own business empire and that doles out money to many of the education NGOs I got to know during fieldwork. Confined to my seat, caught in a moment of feverous affective intensity, I only had my notebook through which to rant:

### PAIN

True pain in the  
heart listening to  
dickhead economists  
shitting their shit over  
the future + present  
of the education  
system.

Kids say real things.

Two dead men in  
suits say dead things.

I want to leave  
in protest to the  
inanity of what's  
being shared on stage.

All idiots on a  
journey to nothing.

Painful though.

Dhawan: I've  
dedicated my life  
to solving the education  
crisis in India.

The idea that  
India's education  
problem can be  
solved is

so so dangerous

Evaara: you should  
write about this conference  
in your thesis.

But it's too painful.

\*

The point of course, is that I am envious of Baan and Ashish Dhawan. I want to sit at the table of power and be heard. I want to sit on stage and be listened to as someone 'dedicated' to something. But instead I sit in the audience, angry and perhaps wishing I had committed to a single, planned career, so that by age 33 I could be known for something.

### **Moment D: Prashant's faith**

A tiny moped soars over the great Yamuna river – carried by a winding concrete rainbow – the Delhi-Noida flyover. Its sole rider shivers in the December wind and squints so as not to miss the exit. He listens carefully to Miss Google Maps barking through his headphones. Navigating Noida is worse than Delhi, the contrast in size between motorway and *gully* makes Delhi feel like Hausmann's Paris, that is, neatly and gracefully proportioned.

I park the moped outside what might be a *chai* stall and ask for directions to ARS Foundation School. '*Haan ji, sir. Gully 5 me hai*', he wails. I ask for *chai* and he directs me further along the normal size road which mediates between the highway and the narrow lanes. At the end of Gully 5 I see a large metal door in a larger brick wall, the guard tells me I can park my scooter across the ditch where the cows are nibbling on rubbish. The metal gate before me is door number 80. Not the address, but the 80<sup>th</sup> door on which Prashant knocked when searching for a school to partner with. Here, at the ARS Foundation School in Noida, he met Prem Sir, who, 'bet on him' and who, 'as a person is an entrepreneur'.

After introductions and more tea, me and the other visitors are allocated classrooms where we can participate in a social-emotional learning lesson designed by Kshamta. In my group is a woman visiting from another NGO and a Class 9 boy from a Teach-Them government school who had been brought by his Teach-Them fellow teacher. Us three outsiders enter the classroom and are directed to spread out amongst the kids.

The topic of the class is fear. First, we meditate. Then ensues a twenty-minute class where the teacher tasks us with discussing our relationship to fear with our table group. She asks us for examples of when we feel fear, what makes us feel fear, and how someone looks when they feel fear. The class is smooth and the kids are engaged. The lesson achieves what I see to be its aim: kids learn that fear is very subjective and personal, that people show fear in different ways, and that we are all afraid of something – even our parents too.

The class went so well that I took it for granted. For me classes like this shouldn't be revolutionary, they should be standard. But how did these specific children in this specific NGO-run school get to access this kind of social-emotional education? Only because Prashant knocked on 80 doors.

So, is it Prashant's resilience that I envy – the determination and grit it takes to keep knocking on doors after 79 rejections? Yes, but there's something more. It is his faith. But what exactly does Prashant have faith in – himself, or his idea? As we've seen in the chapter above, Prashant is forever imagining a world where people are believed in 'as people' rather than for the work they do. Indeed, as Prashant told me on the day of this school visit, 'People don't trust people anymore, they trust ideas, but ideas change'. Does that mean that people don't change? Surely not, because Prashant's message to the boys in the section above is that self-change is what's most important. I'm not sure there is a such a difference between a person's idea and the person themselves. As Prashant correctly sees, an idea – a vision, a project – is nothing without a person to see it through. Entrepreneurs know this: they have a thousand ideas, and they have little understanding which will work until they try them.

What does Prashant have faith in? He has faith in entrepreneurship. He believes that certain people have the energy and drive to just keep trying out idea after idea until one takes hold. For Prashant, it is Kshamta's SEL that has begun to flourish, and with those first shoots of growth Prashant works harder and harder to fertilise it further. I want faith in something the way Prashant has faith in entrepreneurship, I want that clarity and that sense of purpose.

\*

## **Reflection**

Am I being facetious here? Do I really envy and desire the character traits and professional positions of my interlocutors? As I have argued throughout this thesis, desire is mobile. I cannot say that I have a permanent desire for Arushi's resilience, Divya's role, Baan's access, and Prashant's faith. Indeed, my ethnography has shown what happens when humans become too desirous of singular values and so confident of those values that they want to teach them to others. But, like these educators, I suffer moments of affective intensity where my desire for what seems like an easier and simpler working life magnifies to the point where I want easy answers. I want to shed my character for another's. I want the resilience to bring an everyday smile to a tough sweaty school, I want the rhythm and security of a role where I get to host arts-reflection workshop for a young inspired team, I want to sit at a table of bigwigs and be listened to, I want to have faith in my work so that I never feel like chucking this PhD thesis in the bin and retraining as a Sufi mystic.

But of course, as we've seen, Arushi, Divya, Baan and Prashant are all struggling too. None of them have easy lives, none of them simply go through the motions of their personality without doubt, anxiety, and reflection – because it is that doubt, anxiety, and reflection that has helped them grow the strengths with which they operate. I hope that by revealing moments during my fieldwork where I have desired to be like them is some recompense for the scrutiny they have endured under my ethnographic lens. We are all humans learning in the world, I no different to the lovable people I have spent so much time writing about.

## Conclusion

... the I has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms.'

*Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself, (2005:8)*

The Indian middle-classes are indebted to the discourse and practice of 'education', for it is through schools and universities that the middle-classes produce and reproduce a specific modality of capital through which they gain power (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970; Joshi 2001; Fernandes and Heller 2006; Sancho 2015). Education, then, becomes the readiest method through which socially conscious members of the middle class can imagine the realisation of Indian 'development'. In contemporary India, a movement we can describe as the Indian Education Reform Movement is dominated by an organisation I've called Teach-Them. For this NGO, Teach-Them, the content and pedagogy of education reform is overcoded by a theory of social change which centralises individual self-change via self-examination and self-discipline.

Self-examination as a route to self- and social improvement has an ancient lineage that crosses many different cultures and contexts (Foucault 2000; Goenka and Hart 2000). Across these different social and historical moments, proponents of such 'technologies of self' negotiate both *what* constitutes 'improvement', and *who* is allowed to practise the self-examination to produce it. Often, as we saw in the story of the Doon School (Srivastava 1998), it is only the chosen elite who are induced to practise self-development, and for the upper middle-class boys who attended Doon the aim was to induce in them the subjectivity of leadership coloured by the 'enlightenment' of positivism and egalitarianism. We have now reached a particular moment in the development of Indian education regimes where a committed community of young middle-class educators want this technology of self to be practised by *all* children in the country.

The central labour of my thesis has been to explore the discourses, values and mechanics of this technology of self. I introduced the term 'purposed-leadership' to capture the tense assemblage of value which is produced as educators try to imagine how their personal 'growth'

will result in the reduction of education inequity. At the Teach-Them training Centre, new recruits are taught to introspect, locate an internal ‘purpose’, and manifest this purpose through their actions in the world. At the same time, this purpose must always-already align to the mission and method of Teach-Them – leadership must be practised in a way that shapes the education development discourse to centralise the individual as the engine of social equality. For educators who seek to continue their devotion to the ‘movement’ after their Teach-Them teaching period, social entrepreneurship arrives as an alluring profession through which they can continue their journey as ‘purposed-leaders’.

The bulk of my ethnography presented Teach-Them educators negotiating the tensions of inhabiting a subjectivity that values purposed-leadership. One central tension is the stretch to find self-actualisation through manifesting an ‘authentic’ self and simultaneously perform as an individual that is contributing valuably to the mission of education reform. Another, connected tension, is how the need to appear consistently dedicated to the movement pulls against a felt recognition that ethics and politics are relational and contextual. Here, by applying the analytical lens of relational ontology, we see how educators’ desire to actualise an authentic (relational) self is blocked by the funders’ demands for educators to present a consistent personhood worthy of investment. The term ‘social entrepreneurship’ helps make the tension more visible: the unscrupulous energy of entrepreneurialism (rooted in market logic) struggles against the bridle of ethical frameworks arising from a commitment to the ‘social’. My analysis shows the effects of inhabiting this subjective tension, both on the educators’ lifeworlds, and on the education NGOs they ‘lead’.

One conclusion I draw is that valuing purposed-leadership results in the reproduction of the neoliberal social policy of ‘responsibilisation’, a discourse in which everyone must manage themselves instead of relying on a network of governmental, professional, or social institutions for support (see Rose 1996). This conclusion begs the question about outcomes: if the middle-class educators of the IERM suffer the anxiety of responsibilisation that comes from valuing purposed-leadership, then what might happen when these education NGOs succeed and teach children from marginalised backgrounds to desire purposed-leadership themselves? If marginalised children become ‘leaders’ and experience the same tension, what anxieties will they experience without the social, cultural and financial capital of middle-class families? And what might be the social and economic consequences for these children’s families and communities if they place such focus on developing the individual ‘self’?



In my analysis, which resonates with Ajantha Subramanian's recent work (2019), it is cruel to teach the marginalised to believe in meritocracy when cultural norms such as caste continue to influence which persons actually succeed and prosper in contemporary India. It is unethical to train children to believe that they are responsible for their own betterment and that their own self is the key through which social problems will be solved. But as I conclude in the last instance, this does not mean self-reflection and self-awareness are educational practices to be denied to marginalised children. Instead, educators need to be careful around how easily self-reflection slips into responsibilisation when ensconced in a global education development discourse that is itself structured by the positivist, humanist philosophies of neoliberal individualism.

In the below pages, I review key ethnographic moments of affective intensity where educators struggle to negotiate the subjective tension of valuing purposed-leadership. These moments synthesise key themes: the relationship of self-management to purposed-leadership, educators' anxiety to prove (to themselves and others) that they are valuable to the 'movement', how desire for purposed-leadership produces 'responsibilisation', and how relational ontology helps us see why the demand to become an 'autonomous' self produces such subjective tension. I end the conclusion with a reappraisal of Teach-Them and their pedagogy of self-reflection, and suggest how it could be taught without producing a discourse of 'responsibilisation'.

### **Desiring self-management and self-discipline**

One effect of desiring purposed-leadership is that it produces a belief in the practice of self-management and self-discipline. In a moment of affective intensity, Arushi explains how self-management is achieved through the discipline of self-reflection (see Chapter 2). For Arushi, in her role of School Leader, Suraj and Kasak must become self-aware enough to realise that their problems are theirs and theirs alone. For example, if Suraj is afraid of being judged for speaking up in team meetings, he must admit to himself that this is his *own* fear, and that it won't disappear unless he wills it. It does not matter in this moment if his fear is legitimate or if his professional superiors really would judge him for speaking poorly, and it doesn't matter if the reason he might be judged is because he doesn't have the middle-class schooling to speak perfect English. Arushi believes that Suraj can only self-actualise if he practices self-reflection

and becomes responsible for his own fate. Here, Arushi valorises self-reflection so intently because she believes it is self-reflection that leads to autonomy. And it is through narrativizing an autonomous self – a self with agency – that Arushi can move past the injustice she faced in her early life at the hands of a patriarchal, caste-influenced family and society. By presenting and performing as an ‘autonomous’ person, Arushi displays herself as a valid and valuable purposed-leader.

Divya, too, promotes the practice of self-management to Clear-Space juniors. In her role as Schools Director, she wants to be free of her responsibility to manage junior team members to have more time to ‘coach’ them. In the affective intensity of my ethnographic interview, Divya yearns for her staff to have ‘the skills of self-discipline, vulnerability, and asking for support’. For Divya, her own development as a leader supersedes her professional duty to attend to the messy, diverse needs of the members of staff she is employed to support. By placing the responsibility on others to self-manage, she both clears up space to practice leadership (i.e., coaching her teammates), and presents herself as a responsible individual who has come up with a solution to managing education NGOs. That is, she displays herself as someone who is improving her skills as a leader and furthering the purpose of Teach-Them (i.e., to end education inequity). In short, she is performing as a valuable purposed-leader.

The desire for purposed-leadership is perhaps at its most pernicious when educators imagine their own self-actualisation through vicariously investing in the story of one of their potential child beneficiaries. At moments of extreme affective intensity, educators fantasise that the self-confidence of beneficiaries will outstrip their own, and thereby prove the value of the ‘technology of self’ given to the beneficiary. For Rupali, in Chapter 4, having time alone as a child was a boon which helped her develop self-knowledge. This self-knowledge bolstered her self-confidence, and it was self-confidence she needed to go against her parents’ wishes and launch a non-profit education NGO. By telling the story of a teenage girl from a low-income family demanding money for education from her parents, Rupali fantasises that her NGO’s attempts to teach ‘resilience’ will confirm her own standing as a purposed-leader. For Rupali, as for many other Teach-Them educators, her own role as purposed-leader is most complete when she has produced an education NGO that itself reproduces purposed-leaders. It is precisely this logic of exponentiality which plagues the other two protagonists of this thesis, Baan and Prashant, both of whom worry how they will be assessed as ‘valuable’ persons and/or educationalists.

### The anxiety of being ‘valued’

In her analysis of a small design studio in contemporary Delhi, Lilly Irani writes,

As studio members worked to make a living while making a life, they cultivated friendships, explored politics, and formed communities with the express purpose of finding inspiration, accessing knowledge, and even finding material support in *the entrepreneurial quest to refigure their authentic selves as sources of value*. (Irani 2019:108. My emphasis)

What does it mean to refigure one’s authentic self as a source of value? In Chapter 1, I suggest that the Teach-Them training Centre induces fellows to believe that their dedication to improving education comes from an essentialised, core self somewhere deep within. I argue that Teach-Them uses this psychological sleight of hand to mentally prepare recruits to teach in classrooms which they are, in truth, pedagogically underprepared for. By introducing the notion of an ‘authentic self’ which recruits locate through self-reflection, Teach-Them launches young educators on a journey which results in anxiety. Later in their careers, when they fail to match up their genuine ethical and emotional reflections with the demands of a market-logic education development industry, they suffer existential alienation. The anxiety caused by this alienation draws entrepreneurial educators to renege on self-reflection in favour of self-accounting. They elide their sense of self with the professional success of their education NGOs, and then fretfully seek ways to measure how successful they are ‘as people’.

There is another way that the two poles of social  $\leftrightarrow$  entrepreneurship produce the anxious need to self-assess. In their professional home in a for-profit company, Irani’s designers can always fall back on the market to determine their worth. When they design a product and sell it, they have a direct empirical event through which they can judge their own value. The entrepreneurial educators of my thesis cannot access this source of validation. Profits can be measured in balance sheets, and despite the attempts of a neoliberal global education discourse to prove otherwise, education outcomes cannot be so neatly assessed. Both Baan (Chapter 3) and Prashant (Chapter 4), as founders of non-profits, are searching for evidence that their start-ups are producing ‘value’.

We see this anxiety sprout up in Baan's demand for his school teams to produce more 'data', and we see the logic of quantitative accounting slip into his own self-assessments of how dedicated he is to his NGO (100% Clear-space), and how he ranks ethically (8/10 feminist, perhaps). Prashant, like Irani's designers, sees his own *person* as the object which should be valued and invested in, *not* the products – his NGO's education interventions – that he offers to the world. As I highlight at the end of his ethnographic poem, Prashant believes,

Whatever money Kshamta has gotten  
we've gotten when people have loved us as people.

In his speech to the schoolboys – in the second section of Chapter 4 – Prashant promotes this essentialisation of 'the person' as an object of value. As the speech unfolds, we see that not only does Prashant desperately want the boys to believe that they have a consistent self which can be discovered and unlocked to develop social change, but he ends up discarding his professional duty to promote SEL and instead trammels their questioning to proselytise his own notion of 'the good'. Anxious to display himself as a valuable person, Prashant enacts a normatively masculine performance of purposed-leadership which distances him from his interlocutors, rather than serving their education needs.

\*

In short, members of the Teach-Them community inhabit a purposed-leadership subjectivity that induces them to promote the practice of self-management and self-discipline, and/or seek ways to account for their 'value'. They perform in ways intended to present themselves as autonomous and responsible persons, and as successful 'purposed-leaders'. The above analysis summarises how valuing purposed-leadership affects the educators' emotional lifeworlds: educators feel anxious, precarious, surveilled and undervalued. In this way, educators are caught in a relation of cruel optimism: they are taught by Teach-Them that they will gain self-actualisation through committing to education reform and are taught that valuing purposed-leadership is the discourse through which education reform will occur. But it is precisely the daily stress of trying to become purposed-leaders that leaves educators insecure, alienated and unable to realise the self-realisation they so desire; the more they try to gain self-actualisation through mastering purposed-leadership, the more isolated and anxious they become. That is,

the more they attempt to gain self-actualisation the further they get from being part of the sociality they need to achieve it.

Furthermore, it is their experiences of anxiety that induce educators to behave in ways which have negative effects on other members of the education community who are meant to be comrades in the ‘movement’. Let me come back to this point though, because I first want to review a different axis of cruel optimism experienced by educators, one which arises from their need to present as consistent and ‘autonomous’ selves, and one which is best analysed through the theory of relational ontology.

### **Consistent Selves – or relational flexibility?**

Teach-Them educators learn that their self-actualisation will come from manifesting an authentic self but are blocked from acting authentically by the need to present as an autonomous, consistent person unaffected by context. Here, relational ontology provides a key: once we posit educators as ontologically constituted by relations – as sets of relations entangled with other sets of relations – then it makes sense that their attempts to act as consistent persons who are autonomous from relations never feel authentic. To master purposed-leadership, one must present as consistently dedicated to ending education inequity in India, and it is through purposed-leadership that educators are told they will gain self-actualisation. But as per relational ontology, self-actualisation can only be achieved when one accepts the relationality of one’s existence, and one cannot accept this relationality if one is worried about presenting as an ‘autonomous’, consistent educationalist. Hence, desiring purposed-leadership leaves educators in a relation of cruel optimism.

In a recent article, Sanjay Srivastava (in press) also confronts the theme of ‘authentic selfhood’ – and argues for the centrality of ‘relationality’ in anthropological understandings of subjectivity.

The “real” self is the *strategic* and the *relational*. It is ready to strike out in many directions to achieve a modicum of autonomy under conditions of great socio-economic asymmetry and constraint but also able to sustain older moral bonds of family and community. It is not—in any recognizable way—beset by anxieties over “losing” an

“inner” self to an “inauthentic” one that has been acquired through a short term personality development course. (in press:26)

Srivastava’s interlocutors attended personality development courses designed, quite directly, by people who had worked at Landmark Worldwide – the personality development course attended and promoted by Arushi in Chapter 2. My interlocutors were part of longer-term regimes of subjectification, first the five-week Teach-Them training Centre, and then a two-year fellowship within the organisation. It is perhaps due to this more holistic regime of subjectification that the educators I present in my study do struggle to maintain both their value of purposed-leadership and the ‘older moral bonds of family and community’. Yet ‘family’, whether as concept, metaphor, or biological event, is clearly important to all four of my central interlocutors. How then do they negotiate these different regimes of value? They do so by slipping out of the ideals of purposed-leadership and allowing their ‘*strategic* and the *relational*’ “real” self to appear.

This strategic and relational self is most visible in the ethnography on Arushi: in one moment Arushi claims that all will be misery without the self-reflection needed to achieve self-actualisation, the next she adopts the patronage of the School Inspector to gain strategic power for her and her organisation. Arushi’s behaviour matches her *relational* self. In her role as leader to Suraj and Kasak she narrates the ideal of self-reflection as a tool to help these two young school-graduates find a ‘modicum of autonomy under conditions of great socio-economic asymmetry’. When embedded in the school-bound relations of teachers and government officials, she drops this inspirational idealism and uses her favour with the School Inspector (SI) to convince the Principal of the value of keeping her in school. Nevertheless, when it comes to narrativizing her behaviour with the SI to her Clear-Space colleagues, Arushi seems uncomfortable and defiant, almost as if she recognises the efficacy of her actions, while also displaying that she knows it was ‘wrong’. In practice, educators slide between a promotion of individualised purposed-leadership and strategic acts which implicitly acknowledge the self as something contextually constituted. It is only when faced by a situation where they are being observed by other members of the Teach-Them community – as Arushi is here with Clear-Space HR manager Devika – that educators become anxious to narrate their actions as consistently committed to the ideal of purposed-leadership.

As Butler notes, ‘the I has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms’ (2005:8). And yet Arushi, alongside the other Teach-Them educators in my study, is not allowed to feel comfortable with this relationality because she is part of a discourse which posits the individual as an actor that operates autonomous from its material and social ‘context’. I put ‘context’ in quotation marks here because if we view the human subject through relational ontology, as an ‘intra-active becoming’ (Barad 2007), then we see there is no material or definitional boundary between the ‘I’ and the context which ‘surrounds’ it. The problem of course, for the educators of Teach-Them, is that they rely on these narratives of an autonomous, consistent self to make sense of their contributions to an education movement dominated by neoliberal values of speed, efficiency, and quantitative measurement. This is how educators are caught in relations of cruel optimism: the logics of a positivist, ontological individualism they employ to give them a sense of security and meaning are the same logics which disallow the sense of harmony that might come from accepting that they are ‘relational’ becomings. That is, becomings continually being remade and remaking the material-discursive world that they inhabit – and not autonomous selves.

### **Responsibilisation and structural inequality**

The Teach-Them community’s central discourse of purposed-leadership germinates a neoliberal subjectivity of ‘responsibilisation’, in which individual persons are expected to manage their own needs without reliance on formal institutions and communities (Rose 1996). In their review of anthropological attempts to explore responsibilisation, Trnka and Trundle (2014:4) write that the, ‘self-actualised and self-managing individual is central to ... neoliberal visions [of a responsibilised society]’. In my ethnography we see what happens when the neoliberal imaginary of global education development and the practice of self-reflection meet in Teach-Them and its start-ups: the potentially inspiring notion of self-reflection is straitjacketed by a neoliberal moral framework which turns self-reflection into self-surveillance and self-assessment techniques. The vignettes displaying Baan’s attempt to quantify his feminist ethics are a clear instance of how self-reflection sours into a self-assessment that is inappropriately numerical.

Theories that note how neoliberal logics produce responsibilisation also help us analyse Divya’s behaviour as School Leader. Here, the ‘self-management’ which Divya promotes is an

illusion: her ‘ability’ to understand herself and ‘manage’ her behaviour is supported by the social and financial capital of her husband, family, and caste. She is also in a position of power in the organisation – she is Schools Director – and her appeals for staff to admit their faults ignore the professional hierarchy at play.

The discourse of responsabilisation invisibilises structural difference; it ignores how the positionality of class, caste, gender, and race affect one’s subjectivity. When Clear-Space managers like Divya adopt a policy of responsabilisation, members of the Teach-Them movement who do not have a middle-class background become de-valued and marginalised. When Suraj fails to speak up in meetings, Divya sees this failure as a lack of self-discipline, not as the product of Suraj’s historical positionality. For most social scientists, Suraj’s failure to speak would be explained by his lack of a middle-class habitus: he has neither the academic self-confidence nor English language skills which arise from private schooling in India (Bourdieu 1984, see Sancho 2015:98-114). During my fieldwork, Suraj was moved out of his role in school by the Clear-Space managers – there was no direct explanation for this, but it seems that he was not able to ‘ask for help’ in the correct way and not able to ‘self-manage’. For an organisation whose aim is to reduce social inequality, Clear-Space failed to address the inequality being reproduced in intra-staff relations. The cost was not only Suraj’s professional development, but the very mission of the organisation itself: to help improve the lives of those from lower-income backgrounds.

In this thesis, I have hinted at what collateral damage might occur when educators identify with purposed-leadership, which invariably involves promoting the practice of self-management, and accounting for themselves as objects of value. I argue that these performances serve to reaffirm the protagonists’ desire to practice purposed-leadership at the cost of creating a safe-space for learning. The need to experience oneself as successful, influential, and resolved becomes more important than the reason the educator has been trained in purposed-leadership in the first place – to improve education provision to India’s marginalised children.

Here, Divya’s desire to ‘lead’ instead of manage left Suraj without a fixed role. And because of Arushi’s insistence that it is Suraj’s ‘own problem’ that he doesn’t speak up, Suraj is left blaming himself for his dismissal. At another moment, Baan’s need to make sense of his own dedication to always wearing professional clothes – and looking valuable – mobilises patriarchal norms and serves to both condemn Deepika’s self-expression and marginalise her



as someone not taking her role as ‘social entrepreneur’ seriously. Prashant’s speech to the boys gives us the clearest example of how the discourse of ‘responsibilisation’ reaches the intended beneficiaries of the education start-ups of the IERM. The boys he addresses are left with a narrow view of what it takes to be successful (finding an inner purpose and developing the tenacity to manifest it), and risk becoming embittered and despondent when the social and economic inequality that structures their lives blocks their ability to ‘self-actualise’. Again, cruel optimism is at play: children who strive for self-actualisation through a focus on their individuated, agential selves will find themselves further from the harmony of self-actualisation than those did not push so hard to seek it. Furthermore, as we saw briefly in Chapter 1, attempts to ‘responsibilise’ the teachers in government schools seem to fail. Just as we see Arushi slipping towards the pragmatism of patronage to gain power in the bureaucracy of government school, the teachers hold no illusions that any act of individual self-change will make a difference to the structures of inequality that bind their own lives as much as the children they teach.

\*

The faction of the Indian middle class at the heart of the IERM believe in meritocracy, self-management and self-actualisation. They see it as their duty to teach self-management and self-discipline to the marginalised so they have a change to self-actualise. But in doing so they ignore both the structural inequality of society and differences in the positionality of individuals, and thereby depoliticise the process of social change. Couched in liberal notions of individualism and teleological progress, the global education development community that informs the IERM has produced a discourse in which ‘leadership’ is a quality and value per se, and so ‘practising’ leadership becomes an end in itself. The performances of educators attempting to practise purposed-leadership occur at the cost of creating spaces for learning and support of both junior staff and children beneficiaries. The need to experience oneself as successful, influential, and resolved becomes more important than the reason the educator has been trained in purposed-leadership in the first place, that is, to improve education provision to India’s marginalised children. The self-reflection and self-awareness which this global education discourse also promotes is mutated by the anxiety to become a leader. The search for genuine self-knowledge is trampled by the individualist hunger to be ‘valued as a person’ by enacting leadership.

## Valuing Teach-Them

For all my questions around the politics and practices of Teach-Them, the move to provide all children with the power to take more control over their own lives is still truly revolutionary. The problem, as has been my common refrain, is that without a more careful consideration of the political, social, and moral context that undergirds the image of an ‘autonomous’ self, we cannot expect that a collective turn to self-change will result in prosperity, security and empowerment for the marginalised children who the IERM aim to serve.

And yet, the middle-class educators of Teach-Them are trying. They may be caught in myths of meritocracy and simplified, individualistic notions of self-change for social change, but there is a genuine drive and care from this community to use education reform to combat social inequality. This middle-class faction is a far cry away from the ‘politics of forgetting’ of the middle class who hide in gated communities (Fernandes 2004). I am motivated to analyse the IERM because I believe in the people who I worked with in Delhi. As I’ve shown, inhabiting the role of social entrepreneur, and negotiating the dilemma of being consistent and authentic produces anxiety in the educationalists I have studied. As much as I’ve analysed how this anxiety produces defensive behaviour and negative results for the quality of education development, I respect these educators for attempting to launch and invent education initiatives despite this tension of subjectivity and emotional strain.

The problem lies not with the commitment of educators or their intellectual capacity. The problem lies in the fact that their sense of self has been hijacked by a global education discourse which uses their labour to provide spectacular examples of how school development can happen in India and leaves them with an anxious subjectivity in which they feel sub-sufficient. Nevertheless, in the mix of their subjectification at Teach-Them, many young graduates are introduced to the power of self-reflection for the very first time. And perhaps what I admired most in my interlocutors was their genuine commitment to self-questioning and self-analysis, even if it did occasionally slip into quantitative self-accounting. It is this intrigue with the potential for self-reflection that kept me hopeful as I participated in this outpost of the neoliberal imaginary.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> To borrow a phrase from Carol Upadhyia (Upadhyia and Vasavi 2008)

What has motivated my doctoral research is the concern that the potential of teaching this self-reflection is eroded by a global education discourse overcoded by free-market principles and a positivist, ‘autonomous’ image of the human subject which fails to take historical conditions and ontological relationality seriously. And yet subversion lives. During fieldwork I also volunteered with education projects that made space for children to genuinely explore their own feelings and inner lifeworlds, and time for children to link these feelings to wider political and social realities. Right at the heart of Clear-Space, in the daily practices of School Leadership at the Dilip Vihar school, I would see Arushi take time to listen to a child’s experience and nurture them to reflect on their actions – without pretending that it was only up to them to ‘manage’ their own self-actualisation.

My analysis in the last instance is this: space for genuine self-reflection will only appear when Teach-Them stop employing steroid-like regimes of subjectification (such as the immersion of the Centre) that inspire graduates to become educators at the cost of simultaneously inculcating them with an individualistic desire to become purposed-leaders. Self-reflection must be taught with an understanding of the *relational* self in mind, a self which is constituted as much by its agency as by the histories, cultures, and structural inequalities of which it is a part. Self-reflection must not be taught as a method to discover some consistent, pure, inner self that ‘knows’; it must be a tool of praxis, in which the self is always-already seen as a nexus of relations, and not as an object. The idea that the individual is the origin of action must be dethroned. The focus on leadership must be contextualised so that it cannot be used by the middle class as a discourse that legitimates their own successes at the cost of feeding hopes of freedom to a host of marginalised others.

## **Epilogue: Anthropology, relationality, and method**

### **Partible selves, relational ontologies**

Both myself and the educationalists in my study are interested in understanding selfhood and subjectivity. All of us have practised self-reflection as part of the myriad sharing circles and

arts-based workshops that proliferate amongst the Teach-Them community in Delhi. For the educationalists, the aim of self-reflection seems to be a method for better understanding how they can orient themselves to achieving the mission of Teach-Them, of ending education inequity in India. For me, within the limits of this thesis at least, my aim is to better understand how subjectivity is produced, and how we can observe our real values by scrutinising our behaviour. Another difference between the me-of-this-thesis and the educationalists I analyse is that I have inherited a specific anthropological theory through which I am meant to present my knowledge. The educationalists, perhaps, are more grounded in the business management theory of thinkers like Peter Senge or entrepreneurs like Peter Thiel.<sup>82</sup> A key feature of the theory that I have inherited is its insistence on how selves are always partial and fragmented. As two prominent anthropologists of South Asia write,

Acknowledgement of the fragmented or multiple nature of self and subjectivity in *all* ethnographic settings alerts us to the possibility that identities are neither bounded and set, once and for all, nor internally consistent (Kondo 1990; Gupta & Ferguson 1992). We will work with the notion of the 'dividual', not, pace Marriott, as a uniquely South Asian type of self standing in contrast to Euro-American stable individuals, but as a useful way of thinking about all selves: partible, fluid, in flux and in continual processes of exchange with others, whereby characteristics are transferred between people (Marriott 1990). (Osella and Osella 2004:225–226)

As much as I recognise the importance of centralising cultural difference to emphasise how subjectivities shift across differing social and political geographies, I follow Osella and Osella here and place myself and my Indian educator friends as 'partible, fluid, in flux, and in continual processes of exchange with others' – just like all humans. Indeed, this theory of human interaction speaks to my theoretical framework which reads ontology, following Karen Barad, as 'intra-active' (Barad 2007): we all – humans, objects, words – are forever impacting each other's material-discursive existence. By reflecting on the theory and practice of *relationality* in my ethnographic work, I end by restating the value of affective intensity as ethnographic method.

---

<sup>82</sup> Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* and Thiel's *Zero to One* were two of the most popular books amongst the Teach-Them community in Delhi, based on what they talked about and my opportunistic snoops into their bookshelves.

### **Affective intensity as ethnographic method par excellence?**

In the broad political discourse of higher education, both social science and ethnographic fieldwork are being called into question. Anthropologists themselves are directly engaging with the problem continuing ethnography in the contemporary world (Simpson 2016; Elie 2012). As Cassandra Yuill writes of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the UK, ‘the new legislation will affect ethnographic fieldwork and [anthropologists will have to confront] whether the laws contradict the discipline’s core tenets’ (Yuill 2018:36). Furthermore, with the rise of digital ethnography, and the continuing COVID pandemic, scholars are questioning to what extent in-person, long-term immersive fieldwork will remain anthropology’s central research practice (Rutherford 2020). In contribution to this debate, I defend the concept and method of affective intensity and argue that it is a method which can only be practised through attention to the affect of real-time, three-dimensional social interaction.

The ethnographic flow of this thesis is oriented around specific, extreme, and exciting moments where the friction of being a “real” relational self became most visible. In these moments of affective intensity, differing regimes of value rupture against each other, and the heat of the moment produces a diamond of ethnographic data through which we can examine the structure of a lifeworld. Part of the value of this method is in its partiality: I do not pretend that how an educationalist acts in a moment of affective intensity is representative of who they ‘really are’ as a person. Instead, moments of affective intensity show how humans act at crucial moments of emotional and social pressure, and how this affective reality produces a new social reality because these humans feel the need to present a coherent message that places themselves as a legible and valid subject in the world.<sup>83</sup>

It is the texture of the environment in which moments of affect intensity appear that seems so difficult to capture through other social science research methods. It is an environment that accumulated in some proportion to my *relationships* with my interlocutors. This process took time, relied on numerous encounters in different settings, and cannot be created spontaneously. In sifting through my data, it was moments of affective intensity that seemed the most precious events, the centre of vignettes that could illuminate human subjectivity. Moreover, the

---

<sup>83</sup> Cf Butler’s argument that it is ‘moments of interruption’ that help us understand ‘the truth of the person’ rather than their attempts to account their life with ‘seamlessness’ (Butler 2005:64)

ethnographic chapters of my thesis are structured so as to move from the experiences of educators closest to the site of educational intervention – the school – to the narratives of entrepreneurs who aim to revolutionise education through policy work from afar.

My point is that the further educators seem to get from the friction and relationality of *actually administering education*, the more likely they are to misunderstand what supports the growth of the children they aim to serve. I present my intimate, relational, physical, affective ethnography as a defence of in-person ethnographic fieldwork – just as I defend the notion that anyone aiming to influence education policy should have an affective understanding of education by spending time ‘on the ground’. Just as ethnography works on the basis that a researcher builds relationships with informants over time, education works on the basis of knowing the lives of the people one aims to educate.

To indulge in the meta as a closing flourish of this thesis, I too am presently caught in a moment of affective intensity as write my final thoughts on a project which has taken over four years to complete. I, like, these educators, want to present something that is legible to both the academy and the community of educators to whom I am still attached in Delhi. I am pressed up against the desire to produce a coherent, bounded object that passes a viva examination by the global Anthropology community and the discomfort of the obstinance and permanence of this thesis-as-object as I continue to think through questions of self, subjectivity, neoliberalism, desire, pedagogy, and social justice after this object is made. So be it. This is just a moment in time – it is partial, fragmented, affective – and it too shall pass.

\*

## Bibliography

- Abeyasekera, Asha L. 2016. 'Narratives of Choice: Marriage, Choosing Right and the Responsibility of Agency in Urban Middle-Class Sri Lanka'. *Feminist Review* 113 (1): 1–16.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2015. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Alexander, Robin J. 2003. *Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Apple, Michael W. 2006. 'Understanding and Interrupting Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism in Education'. *Pedagogies: An International Journal* 1 (1): 21–26. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15544818ped0101\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15544818ped0101_4).
- Arendt, Hannah. 2018. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Arnold, David, Stuart H Blackburn, and British Library. 2004. *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*. Bloomington, In.: Indiana University.
- ASA. 2011. 'Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice'. Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth. <https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ASA%20ethics%20guidelines%202011.pdf>.
- Ball, Stephen J. 2012. *Global Education Inc.: New Policy Networks and the Neo-Liberal Imaginary*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- . 2016a. 'Following Policy: Networks, Network Ethnography and Education Policy Mobilities'. *Journal of Education Policy* 31 (5): 549–66.
- . 2016b. 'Subjectivity as a Site of Struggle: Refusing Neoliberalism?' *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37 (8): 1129–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1044072>.
- Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the University Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bardhan, Pranab Kumar. 2010. *The Political Economy of Development in India: Expanded Edition with an Epilogue on the Political Economy of Reform in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Baviskar, Amita, and Raka Ray. 2011. *Elite and Everyman The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group.

- Beatty, Andrew. 2018. 'Authors in Search of a Character: Ethnography and Life Writing'. *Social Anthropology* 26 (1): 30–43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12482>.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. 1949. *Le Deuxieme Sexe*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Bénéï, Véronique. 2008. *Schooling Passions: Nation, History, and Language in Contemporary Western India*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Berlant, Lauren Gail. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Boal, Augusto. 1995. *Rainbow of Desire*. London: Routledge.
- Boell, M., and P. Senge. 2016. 'School Climate and Social Fields'. *Garrison Global Collaboration for Emotional, Social and Systems Education & MIT*.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean Claude Passeron. 1970. *La reproduction: éléments pour une théorie du systeme d'enseignement*. Paris: éditions de Minuit.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York; London: Routledge.
- . 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Cross, Jamie. 2013. 'Motivating Madhu: India's SEZs and the Spirit of Enterprise'. In *Enterprise Culture in Neoliberal India: Studies in Youth, Class, Work and Media*, edited by Nandini Gooptu, 124–39. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Daniel, E. Valentine. 1984. *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*. Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press.
- Davies, Bronwyn. 2014. *Listening to Children: Being and Becoming*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1994. *Difference and Repetition*. London: Athlone.
- . 2007. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Athlone.
- Doerr, John. 2018. *Measure What Matters How Google, Bono, and the Gates Foundation Rock the World with OKRs*. London: Penguin.
- Drayton, William. 2006. 'Everyone a Changemaker: Social Entrepreneurship's Ultimate Goal'. *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization* 1 (1): 80–96. <https://doi.org/10.1162/itgg.2006.1.1.80>.
- Easwaran, Eknath. 2019. *The Bhagavad Gita*. Tomales: Nilgiri Press.
- Elie, Serge D. 2012. 'The Production of Social Science Knowledge beyond Occidentalism: The Quest for a Post-Exotic Anthropology'. *Third World Quarterly* 33 (7): 1211–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2012.691828>.



- Elliott, John. 2001. *Action Research for Educational Change*. Milton Keynes; Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Ellis, Carolyn. 2004. *The Ethnographic I: a Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Erhard, Werner, M. Jensen, and K. Granger. 2012. 'Creating Leaders: An Ontological/Phenomenological Model'. In *The Handbook for Teaching Leadership: Knowing, Doing, and Being.*, edited by Scott A Snook, Nitin Nohria, and Rakesh Khurana, Chapter 16. Thousand Oaks, CA etc.: SAGE.
- ESRC. 2018. 'Our Principles: Researchers and Research Teams'. Economic and Social Research Council. <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/our-principles-researchers-and-research-teams/>.
- Fals-Borda, Orlando. 1987. 'The Application of Participatory Action-Research in Latin America'. *International Sociology* 2 (4): 329–47.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/026858098700200401>.
- Ferguson, James. 1990. *The Anti-Politics Machine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fernandes, Leela. 2004. 'The Politics of Forgetting: Class Politics, State Power and the Restructuring of Urban Space in India'. *Urban Studies* 41 (12): 2415–30.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980412331297609>.
- Fernandes, Leela, and Patrick Heller. 2006. 'Hegemonic Aspirations'. *Critical Asian Studies* 38 (4): 495–522. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672710601073028>.
- Fisher, William F. 1997. 'Doing Good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1): 439–64.  
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.26.1.439>.
- Foucault, Michel. 2000. *Ethics: subjectivity and truth*. London: Penguin Books.
- Freeman, Carla. 2014. *Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.
- Freire, Paulo. 1975. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin Education.
- Ghosh, Suresh Chandra. 2009. *The History of Education in Modern India, 1757-2007*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
- Goenka, S. N, and William Hart. 2000. *The Discourse Summaries: Talks from a Ten-Day Course in Vipassana Meditation*. Seattle: Vipassana Research Publications.
- GOI. 2006. 'Constitution of India'. <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/coi-4March2016.pdf>.

- Gooptu, Nandini. 2013a. *Enterprise Culture in Neoliberal India: Studies in Youth, Class, Work and Media*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- . 2013b. 'Introduction'. In *Enterprise Culture in Neoliberal India: Studies in Youth, Class, Work and Media*, edited by Nandini Gooptu, 1–24. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Gray, John, John P O'Regan, and Catherine Wallace. 2021. *Education and the Discourse of Global Neoliberalism*. London: Routledge.
- Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J Seigworth. 2010. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.
- Grover, Shalini. 2018. *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support: Lived Experiences of the Urban Poor in India*. London: Routledge
- Hall, Kathleen D. 2005. 'Science, Globalization, and Educational Governance: The Political Rationalities of the New Managerialism'. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 12 (1): 153–82. <https://doi.org/10.2979/gls.2005.12.1.153>.
- Haraway, Donna J. 1991. *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*. ———. 2007. *When Species Meet*. Univ of Minnesota Press.
- Härmä, Joanna. 2011. 'Low Cost Private Schooling in India: Is It pro Poor and Equitable?' *International Journal of Educational Development, Access, Equity and Transitions in Education in Low Income Countries*, 31 (4): 350–56. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2011.01.003>.
- Heller, P., P. Mukhopadhyay, and S. Banda. 2015. 'Exclusion , Informality , and Predation in the Cities of Delhi An Overview of the Cities of Delhi Project August 2015'. 2015. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Exclusion-%2C-Informality-%2C-and-Predation-in-the-of-Heller-Mukhopadhyay/0d84d9ac2e8d602d61ab28bf4b74a95a01cc1be3>.
- hooks, bell. 2013. *Writing beyond Race Living Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Irani, Lilly. 2019. *Chasing Innovation: Making Entrepreneurial Citizens in Modern India*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *The Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Jackson, Michael. 2013. *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2021. *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press

- Jeffrey, Craig. 2010. *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Jeffrey, Craig, Patricia Jeffery, and Roger Jeffery. 2008. *Degrees without Freedom?: Education, Masculinities, and Unemployment in North India*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Joshi, Sanjay. 2001. *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kingdon, Geeta, and Mohd Muzammil. 2003. *The Political Economy of Education in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kurtz, Stanley N. 1992. *All the Mothers Are One: Hindu India and the Cultural Reshaping of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- LaDousa, Chaise. 2014. *Hindi Is Our Ground, English Is Our Sky: Education, Language, and Social Class in Contemporary India*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Larsen, Randy J., and Ed Diener. 1987. 'Affect Intensity as an Individual Difference Characteristic: A Review'. *Journal of Research in Personality* 21 (1): 1–39. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566\(87\)90023-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566(87)90023-7).
- Latour, Bruno. 1996. 'On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications'. *Soziale Welt* 47 (4): 369–81.
- Lenz Taguchi, Hillevi. 2010. *Going beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education: Introducing an Intra-Active Pedagogy*. London: Routledge.
- Liechty, Mark. 2003. *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Lingard, Bob, and Fazal Rizvi. 2010. *Globalizing Education Policy*. New York; London: Routledge.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
- Lukose, Ritty A. 2009. *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Malinowski, B. 1930. '17. Kinship'. *Man* 30: 19–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2789869>.
- Marriott, McKim. 1976. *Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Committee on Southern Asian Studies.
- McGuigan, Jim. 2014. 'The Neoliberal Self'. *Culture Unbound* 6 (1): 223–40. <https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.146223>.
- McIntyre, Alice. 2008. *Participatory Action Research*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

- McTaggart, Robin. 1991. 'Principles for Participatory Action Research'. *Adult Education Quarterly* 41 (3): 168–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001848191041003003>.
- Mehta, Rohit, Edwin Creely, and Henriksen, Danah. 2020. 'A Profitable Education Countering Neoliberalism in 21st Century Skills Discourses'. *Handbook of Research on Literacy and Digital Technology Integration in Teacher Education*, January. [https://www.academia.edu/41207297/A\\_Profitable\\_Education\\_Countering\\_Neoliberalism\\_in\\_21st\\_Century\\_Skills\\_Discourses](https://www.academia.edu/41207297/A_Profitable_Education_Countering_Neoliberalism_in_21st_Century_Skills_Discourses).
- Mines, Mattison, and Vijayalakshmi Gourishankar. 1990. 'Leadership and Individuality in South Asia: The Case of the South Indian Big-Man'. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 49 (4): 761–86. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2058235>.
- Mitra, Meghalee. 2019. 'The "Janeu" – Why Do Woke Brahmins Flaunt a Symbol of Oppression?' *Live Wire* (blog). 2019. <https://livewire.thewire.in/politics/the-janeu-why-do-woke-brahmins-flaunt-a-symbol-of-oppression/>. Accessed: April 25, 2022
- Mosse, David. 2005. *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. London: Pluto Press.
- Muehlebach, Andrea Karin. 2012. *The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy*. Chicago University Press: Chicago
- NISA. 2016. 'Data On School Closures Due To RTE Act (As Of May 2016)'. National Independence Schools Alliance. <https://ccsindia.org/updates/data-school-closures-due-rte-act-may-2016>. Accessed: August 1, 2018
- Olssen, Mark, John A Codd, and Anne-Marie O'Neill. 2004. *Education Policy: Globalization, Citizenship and Democracy*. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Osella, Caroline, and Filippo Osella. 2004. 'Young Malayalee Men and Their Movie Heroes'. In *South Asian Masculinities: Contexts of Change, Sites of Continuity*, edited by R. Chopra, Caroline Osella, and Filippo Osella, 224–61. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Piliavsky, Anastasia. 2014. *Patronage as Politics in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2020. *Nobody's People: Hierarchy as Hope in a Society of Thieves*. Stanford, California : Stanford University Press
- Robbins, Joel. 2013. 'Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (3): 447–62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12044>.
- Rose, Nikolas. 1996. 'The Death of the Social? Re-Figuring the Territory of Government'. *Economy and Society* 25 (3): 327–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085149600000018>.

- . 1998. *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power and Personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosenwald, George C, and Richard L Ochberg. 1992. *Storied Lives the Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rudnykyj, Daromir. 2021. 'The Protestantism of Neoliberalism'. Lecture at McCrum Theatre, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University. November 11 2021.
- Rutherford, Danilyn. 2020. 'The Future of Anthropological Research: Ethics, Questions, and Methods in the Age of COVID-19: Part I – The Wenner-Gren Blog'. 2020. <http://blog.wennergren.org/2020/06/the-future-of-anthropological-research-ethics-questions-and-methods-in-the-age-of-covid-19-part-i/>.
- Saldaña, Johnny. 2005. 'An Introduction to Ethnodrama'. In *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre*, edited by Saldaña, Johnny, 1–36. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.
- Sancho, David. 2015. *Youth, Class and Education in Urban India: The Year That Can Break or Make You*. London: Routledge
- Sarkar, Tanika. 2006. 'Birth of a Goddess: "Vande Mataram", "Anandamath", and Hindu Nationhood'. *Economic and Political Weekly* 41 (37): 3959–69.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Senge, Peter M. 1990. *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday/Currency.
- Shah, Alpa. 2018. *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas*. London: Hurst & Company
- Simpson, Edward. 2016. 'Is Anthropology Legal? Earthquakes, Blitzkrieg, and Ethical'. *Focaal* 74 (March). <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2016.740109>.
- Singh, Bhrigupati. 2015. *Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Sripati, Vijayashri, and Arun Thiruvengadam. 2004. 'India: Constitutional Amendment Making the Right to Education a Fundamental Right'. *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 2 (January). <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/2.1.148>.
- Srivastava, Prachi. 2008. 'The Shadow Institutional Framework: Towards a New Institutional Understanding of an Emerging Private School Sector in India'. *Research Papers in Education* 23 (4): 451–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520701809783>.
- Srivastava, Sanjay. 1998. *Constructing Post-Colonial India: National Character and the Doon School*. London: Routledge

- . in press. 'Relational Flexibility: Skills, "Personality Development" and the Limits of Theorizing Neoliberalism in India'. *American Ethnologist*. (Forthcoming)
- Stenhouse, Lawrence. 1975. *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*. London: Heinemann.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1990. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press.
- Subramanian, Ajantha. 2019. *The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Subramanian, Vidya K. 2017. 'Marketisation, Managerialism and School Reforms: A Study of PPPs in Elementary Education in Delhi'. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- . 2018. 'From Government to Governance: Teach for India and New Networks of Reform in School Education'. *Contemporary Education Dialogue* 15 (1): 21–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973184917742247>.
- Swantz, Marija Liisa. 1982. 'Research as Education for Development: A Tanzanian Case'. In *Creating Knowledge: A Monopoly?*, edited by B. Hall, Gillette A., and R. Tandon, 113–26. New Delhi: Society for Participatory Research.
- Tandon, R. 1981. 'Participatory Evaluation and Research: Main Concepts and Issues'. In *Participatory Research and Evaluation: Experiments in Research as a Process of Liberation.*, edited by W. Fernandes and R. Tandon, 15–34. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.
- Tooley, J., and P. Dixon. 2007. 'Private Schooling for Low-Income Families: A Census and Comparative Survey in East Delhi, India'. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJEDUDEV.2006.08.002>.
- Tooley, James. 2009. *The Beautiful Tree: A Personal Journey into How the World's Poorest People Are Educating Themselves*. Washington, D.C: Cato institute.
- Trnka, Susanna, and Catherine Trundle. 2014. 'Competing Responsibilities: Moving Beyond Neoliberal Responsibilisation'. *Anthropological Forum* 24 (2): 136–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2013.879051>.
- Uberoi, Patricia. 2002. 'Imagining the Family: An Ethnography of Viewing Hum Aapke Hain Koun ... !' In *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Popular Culture in India*, edited by Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, 309–51. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- . 2006. 'The Family in India'. In *Handbook of Indian Sociology*, edited by Veena Das, 275–307. New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Upadhyaya, Carol. 2011. 'Software and the "new" Middle Class in the "New India"'. In *Elite and Everyman The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes.*, edited by Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray, 167–92. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Upadhyaya, Carol, and A. R Vasavi. 2008. *In an Outpost of the Global Information Economy: Work and Workers in India's Outsourcing Industry*. London: Routledge.
- Vaidyanatha Ayyar, R. V. 2017. *History of Education Policymaking in India, 1947-2016*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Van Maanen, John. 2011. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Varma, Pavan K. 2007. *The Great Indian Middle Class*. New Delhi; New York: Penguin Books India.
- Verdouw, Julia Joanne. 2017. 'The Subject Who Thinks Economically? Comparative Money Subjectivities in Neoliberal Context'. *Journal of Sociology* 53 (3): 523–40.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783316662717>.
- Verger, Antoni, Mario Novelli, and Hülya K Altinyelken. 2015. *Global Education Policy and International Development: New Agendas, Issues, and Policies*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic
- Walkerdine, Valerie. 1990. *Schoolgirl fictions*. London: Verso.
- Weber, Max. 2005. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. E-Book. Taylor & Francis e-Library: Taylor and Francis.
- Weiner, Myron. 1991. *The Child and the State in India: Child Labor and Education Policy in Comparative Perspective*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University.
- Yuill, Cassandra. 2018. "'Is Anthropology Legal?': Anthropology and the EU General Data Protection Regulation'. *Anthropology in Action* 25 (2): 36–41.  
<https://doi.org/10.3167/aia.2018.250205>.
- Zahara, Alex. 2016. 'Refusal as Research Method in Discard Studies'. *Discard Studies*. 21 March 2016. <https://discardstudies.com/2016/03/21/refusal-as-research-method-in-discard-studies/>. Accessed: April 25, 2022

# *Appendix 1: Acknowledgements*

## **Acknowledgments**

\*

This thesis is primarily dedicated to two women:

To my mother Vicky, who has been teaching me how to be an anthropologist since the day I was born. Not a trained social scientist – far from it – but an engaged, curious, questioning human who has gets close to the people around them and builds faith in the world through relational knowing.

To my partner Jasmine, who has been my most ceaseless critic as she watches a white Britisher assume to speak authoritatively about India. She has also been my greatest ally, because her love and faith in me have nurtured my confidence that I can write in both an insightful and caring way – and because her own insights and reflections are so terribly illuminating.

I also want to make special mention of two other women who have been instrumental in my journey to becoming a doctor of anthropology.

To Tiff, for being one of my oldest friends and sharpest critics, and the first person in my life to see that I should study anthropology, all those years ago in front of the British Museum.

To Bella, for inspiring me with your life and thoughts in the first year of the PhD – and after – and for helping me accept myself as a being in the chaos of the world.

To the most beautifully feminine man I know, I offer my deepest love and gratitude. To write about him always brings tears to my eyes. Whatever this world is could never be without him. To Ed, my brother, z-bots and cowboy sheets for life.



Next shout out goes to my oldest non-blood-tie friend – RC. Essentially for all his love and support, but also for reminding me of existentialist truths and the only form of communication that really makes sense to me in this world: the arts.

To Becky, Shooee, Lorena, and Ford, thanks always for both lifting me to playful heights and bringing me back down to earth. If what we have isn't deep community, I don't know what is.

To John and Zaki, my UK-born intellectual and emotional male confidants, whatever life-stopping reflection it is that drags you to the pub with me to hash it out, you're always there – and always affirming and dismissing my wild generalisations with beautiful accuracy.

And so to India.

My first acknowledgment has to be to Baan, who put up with more of my critical appraisal of his self and his organisation than any should have to bear. There is magic in you Baan, and I love you for it. (Apologies for not writing to you in your real name, and the same goes for those below ...)

Arushi. Your genuine leadership is something I will always admire, and I'm so grateful to you for pulling me straight into your cosy little team on my first day at school and always making me feel part of the family ☺ .

Prashant, you have so much love in you, and I know you will find the right way to let it out. You fascinate me and frustrate me, and that's what makes you so deliciously human and so wonderful 'as a person' ;)

Divya, thank you for bringing me to the heart of the organisation and having the faith in me and the world to accept my critiques and questions with all the love and hope they are intended.

And to *chotta sher*, you know who you are, love to you for finally expressing your emotions to me on a roof in the hills, despite 80% of the words being *behenchod*.

There are a host of other educators and questioners in Delhi who I would love to name by name, but the importance of keeping things anonymous in a PhD like this one means I can't. I

do want to offer a special mention to one woman I met on my journey who shared so much of her life story with me over numerous evenings in Coffee Bond, and for whom I keep a special place in my heart – largely for again, showing me a world and a faith in the world that I – in this life on earth – can never fully know.

To all the teachers in SDMC Dilip Vihar, *dhanyvad aapko. Shukriya aapke time aur intezaar ke liye, mujhse. Jab mai aapke school kaam kar raha tha, tab mai bohot khushi tha.*

*Saare bachche ko issi school me the: Wah! Kya baat hai! Mai aapko pyaar aur aasha bhej raha hun ☺*

To the anthropologist who hates anthropology, I send my warmest regards. PK, thanks for being my teacher and lecturing me on caste and the history of India – as well as showing me one Delhi's finest institutions – Hornbill.

To Bence, thanks for being my European home away from home in Delhi, and reminding me that even those who work with numbers and international development can be some of the most curious and creative people alive.

To Kashif, Sudhanshu, who weren't working in the education sector in Delhi and just wanted to play Fifa and watch Rick and Morty with me – while still accepting all my anthropological questions about their lives in India!

To Hindolee, who was most excited that I bought my second hand scooter from her friend, and who loved riding around the city on it with me.

To Rita and Jay, my landlords, because – despite always having to hide the fact that my girlfriend came to stay – living in your house gave me a home.

To vqueeram, the holder of the kind of home I want to see more of, and who would roll their eyes at how my difficulties with gender structure this acknowledgements section.

And to a Delhi-ite who became my friend in Covid over pedagogy and the digital world, and solid confidante back in Sussex: dyuti. Let's go teach the world some shit.

Back at Sussex, shout out to Chloe who made the beginning of this whole PhD so casual and light!

And of course, to end with some men. Big love to my two boys at Sussex, my supervisors, Geert de Neve and Filippo Osella. I remember being a little disappointed that I had two male supervisors at first, but the world works in mysterious ways and I'm grateful to have been guided by you both across this complex terrain with both emotional and professional insight.

On this note around masculine forms of emotion which continue to intrigue me, I send a big thank you to my father, John – perhaps the biggest romantic I know, despite his attempts to embody archetypal unemotional fatherhood. Thank you, Dad, for listening to me as I cried about falling in love with a woman in Delhi and not knowing how to plan a life where I could see her again. I did get to see her again, and somehow I completed a PhD in the meantime.

A final man who really deserves a mention is Diederick Raven, the first professional anthropologist I met – who, characteristically (for me) – never trained as one. Thank you Diederick from introducing me to this subject and method, and for choosing to supervise me alongside Linda, Maria, Hessel, Donja, Like, and Christa – and creating the most magical, attentive, and political group of friends I've ever known.

The bottom line shout out of this thesis goes to my shadow self, the guru of life gurus, and the person who is the patron saint of this acknowledgements section for telling me in a recent text 'your new buddies and memories are the real outcome of your PhD years'. Thank you Rik for just being light in this world that is sometimes so dark.