Becoming English speakers: a critical sociolinguistic ethnography of English, inequality and social mobility in Delhi

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Sociolinguistics)

December 2020
Declaration

I, Katherine Elizabeth Highet, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Word count: 99500
Abstract

This thesis explores how students in an educational NGO in Delhi come to seek out English as a means for social mobility. It highlights the tensions between such discourses and the inequality that students encounter through other elements of social stratification such as class, caste, gender and religion, and interrogates the limits of the linguistic capital of English in such a pursuit. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork (2018-19) consisting of daily participant observation, interviews with students and staff, and analysis of textual artefacts, I opt for a critical sociolinguistic ethnographic approach and a focus on theoretical tools and frameworks that allow for an exploration of the situatedness of language practice and meaning-making, of the ideological and indexical signalling of practices, and of the historical and political economic constraints and affordances which exist. I argue that students’ experiences with English and their construction of the linguistic object are shaped through their own lived trajectories and social positioning, through their dialectical engagement with neoliberal discourses that frame English as a key to social mobility for (certain) Indians, and through their navigation of both the linguistic capital and the associated non-linguistic capital that comes to form part of the ‘package’ of English speakerhood. Ultimately, I demonstrate how students both reproduce and contest simple correlations of English and success, how they oscillate between hope and despair by bringing to the forefront their own experiences of social stigma and discrimination, and how they come to understand the pursuit of English as not only the acquisition of a linguistic resource but as an entire transformation of the self – a transformation that exhorts not only a neoliberal subjectivity but a particular personhood shaped around notions of caste, middle-classness and coloniality.

Word count: 282
Impact statement

This thesis explores the intricate and complex challenges faced by young, marginalised Indians in Delhi as they struggle for social mobility within a web of entangled layers of inequality. The knowledge produced interrogates the concept of linguistic capital itself, by not only questioning the extent to which English can lead to a prosperous future for these students, but also by asking critical questions about the nature of their acquisition of English. That is, by focusing on the becoming of English speakerhood, this thesis underlines how, for these speakers, the process of learning English is lived and understood by both staff and students as a process of becoming a different person, of developing a subjectivity shaped through the tropes of neoliberalism, colonialism, middle-classness and caste. My contributions to scholarly discussions of the ‘uptake’ of neoliberalism equally demonstrate that this is a contested process, one that students both question and desire. Such findings are highly relevant to current debates in Critical Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology and are also of equal importance to practitioners working in language education, particularly in the Global South, and amongst those working in language education for migrants in the Global North. The findings encourage academics and practitioners to think critically about the agendas served by such programmes, and to reflect upon the potentialities for harm which they contain, which are not easily reconciled with the potential benefits that are claimed.

These findings have been disseminated through a variety of academic outputs, including two first author chapters in edited volumes (Highet & Del Percio 2021a; 2021b) and through prestigious international conferences such as AAA 2019 and IAWE 2019. At IAWE I was awarded the Kachru Award for best student paper. A journal article on the ‘risks’ of speaking English is currently in preparation for submission to the World Englishes Journal. In 2021, the findings will be presented at a panel on ‘The Promise of Language’ (AILA 2021) and at a panel I have co-organised on ‘Unequal Personalities: Language Education and the Politics of Difference’ (23rd Sociolinguistics Symposium).
Beyond academia, the immediate impact of this thesis will be within the NGO. Due to the COVID pandemic and financial constraints, it has not been possible to provide post-fieldwork feedback to the NGO in person. I am therefore currently in the process of compiling a post-doctorate fellowship proposal which I hope will allow me to engage in a collaborative project with the NGO in order to share directly with them my findings and to work together to see how their practices might be adjusted and improved. This is of relevance not only to this NGO, but also more widely to scholars working in critical research who are interested in questions of the challenges and opportunities involved when collaborating with stakeholders within the framework of social justice. Thus, I hope that through this thesis, and the practical actions and activities which arise from it, I may contribute to the emerging conversation on the nature and role of critical research in fostering social change.

Word count: 500
Acknowledgements

My first thanks go to my brilliant supervisor, John O’Regan. Since the first time we met – over Skype while I was still teaching in India – you have been unwavering in your belief that I can achieve great things. Having such support has made all the difference, and I hope that I have managed to meet your expectations! I am also very grateful to Alfonso Del Percio, not only for your feedback on the first draft of this thesis, but for opening so many doors for me, and for pushing me to have confidence in my work. My sincerest thanks to you both.

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to my examiners, Alexandre Duchêne and Miguel Pérez-Milans. The viva was one of the most wonderful experiences of my thesis, and I am truly grateful for the discussions we had.

I have met countless inspiring people throughout the course of my PhD who have not only helped shape the ideas that form this thesis, but who have also been great friends. I owe everything in this thesis to my participants, and I wish them all the very best in their futures. This project found its roots in the school in Gujarat where I spent four and a half fantastic years – I owe so much of what I learned about India to my students, and my colleagues there (particularly my lovely Quenchies friends). I want to thank the members of the IOE’s department of Culture, Communication and Media, the Language and Work group, and my friends in the Sociolinguistics Lab for all of the wonderful and thought-provoking discussions we have had. Thanks also to Virginia (Gigi) Grover, Emma Brooks, Sara Young and Birgul Yilmaz for your guidance and kindness, and to Josh Kirby and Cat Tebaldi for offering your thoughts on parts of this thesis (delivered with sparkling wit). And where would I be without my PhD buddies – Peter Browning, Luis Carabantes and Andrea Sunyol. From our academic conversations and your consistently brilliant feedback on my work, to endless WhatsApps and the (well-needed) time off in the IOE bar, your friendship has meant the world to me throughout this thesis.
Above all, thanks to my family – to Mum, Dad and Jonny. You put up with my repeated broken promises to come home from India after ‘just one more year’. You had to deal with the stress of me being hospitalised halfway across the world with Typhoid, and you have consistently given me the help I needed when I was struggling financially. I am so lucky to have you, and I can’t thank you enough for these 30 years (27 ½ in your case, Jonny) of love and support. Thanks also to Grandma, Auntie Trish, Uncle David and my dear late Auntie Nell for being my number one cheerleaders. And to my grandparents who didn’t get to see me make it this far – I hope that I would have made you proud.

And, of course, to Paweł, for being the most wonderful human being I have ever met. You have got me through the hardest parts of this thesis, and you always make life just that bit better. Dziękuję Ci bardzo, kochanie - wreszcie skończyłam!
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Chapter 1 – Introduction: Speaking English, English speakers

As I came to the end of writing this thesis, in late August 2020, the Indian National Congress politician and member of the Lok Sabha (lower house of Indian parliament), Karti P Chidambaram, released a press statement announcing his opposition to the National Education Policy (NEP) that had been approved by the Indian government in July 2020 (Chidambaram 2020). In the statement, released on Facebook and shared widely by fellow politician, Shashi Tharoor (Tharoor 2020), Chidambaram takes the NEP to task for its exclusion of English from the list of Indian languages, and the consequences this has for whether or not English should be a medium of instruction in government schools, given the NEP stance that preference for medium of education should lie with the child’s “mother tongue”, a label which – according to the NEP – does not apply to English for Indians. Arguing that English is a legitimate Indian language, he writes of the contributions that Indians have made to English: “We have produced new thought, literature, music, cinema and science in English, and created for ourselves an Indian English that is uniquely our own” (Chidambaram 2020). In turn, he maintains, English has provided great things for India too: “English has acted as the great equalizer against linguistic oppression” (ibid). At its core, his statement seeks to validate the use of English in India, and thereby push for continued, widespread English education. Encouraging ‘mother tongue’ education in government schools, he argues, will only serve to increase inequality as those with the resources to attend private English medium schools will continue to do so.

Chidambaram’s press statement is interesting on several accounts. He notes himself that the NEP raises “several old and new debates” that have occupied the discussion around education in India since independence. Part of these debates revolves around the question of whether or not English can be considered an Indian language, and the comments left under the Facebook post bear witness to tense disagreements. Some express delight in taking “revenge” on the colonisers by co-opting their language; some ask why India continues to revere the language of colonial “parasites”; some point to an
apparent hypocrisy in the acceptance of an “outsider” language but refusal by certain parts of India to accept its “true” language (Hindi); some argue that, without English, India would never have “developed” (Tharoor 2020). Heated arguments and conflicting ‘facts’ fill the comments section. Such debates, while they date back to Indian independence and still earlier, have consistently re-emerged at critical moments throughout modern India’s history. As Annamalai has written, since Independence the discussions over language medium in education have been considered “fundamental for building a new nation” (2005:23). In recent years, with the rise of radical right-wing Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva (see e.g. Hutton 2019), supported in many ways by the current government, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the country finds itself once again in a moment of crisis in the definition of the Indian nation. This crisis is further exacerbated in the current context by the conflict between a desire to repudiate colonial rule by replacing English, and a desire to develop the “skills and knowledge needed for an industrial economy” (Annamalai 2005:24), particularly in an era of global neoliberalism. As such, these public debates over languages – what some term linguistic ideological debates (Blommaert 1999) – represent far more than issues over the teaching of English. They are, fundamentally, a battleground for struggles over the building and defining of the Indian nation on the global stage (ibid).

But Chidambaram’s statement is also interesting because of what is not said, because of what he does not feel compelled to justify. By arguing that unequal English distribution across education in India will exacerbate “social divides”, he seems to imply that English can alleviate inequality, that what stands primarily in the way of success for disadvantaged students is their access to English. Unlike the controversial status of English as an Indian language, he does not appear to need to argue the case for equality through English, implying thus that this is an unquestioned assumption. In doing this, Chidambaram skirts around the more fundamental question of how English comes to be indexically linked to social mobility to begin with. It may appear an obvious formulation – one does not have to look far in India for examples of English being touted as the key to success, and anyone familiar with the colonial history of India can take an educated guess at how this began. But in taking this association for granted, we lose sight of exactly how and why English continues to be discursively shaped as a tool for social mobility, what
this imagined mobility looks like, and for whom. To ask how young Indians come to invest in English for social mobility is to shift the analysis from English to its speakers, asking what they perceive English to do for them in their specific social positioning, how it comes to be that English is understood as the only means for this, and indeed the extent to which they truly ‘believe’ in the power of English. These questions are vital to raise because they turn our attention towards the particular social conditions through which English has come to be meaningful. This thesis is thus not specifically about English – it is an exploration of how language becomes an object onto which hopes, desires and tensions are projected by individual actors navigating their way through deeply unequal social circumstances.

These are questions that have interested me for the best part of a decade. When I was 21, I was offered a teaching job in a private school in a town in Gujarat, northwest India. I had not actively sought it out. I was in the final year of my undergraduate degree; I was overwhelmed with choices of what to do next, keen to ‘see the world’, and naïve enough to think that following a partner across the world in my early 20s was a good idea. I flew out over Christmas, visited the school, met the director, and was promptly asked if I would like to join the team the following summer as a French teacher. French is not my first language. I was on the cusp of completing my undergraduate degree in French at UCL and had a few weeks’ experience working as a French language assistant in a North London secondary school. My work visa application took just over a month, cost in the region of £350, and required relatively few documents. It was a pain-free process – the only real challenge was convincing my parents that this was a good decision, that I would be safe, and that I would promise to come home after a year. I didn’t keep my promise. I loved being in India, I became invested in the school and the students, and I thoroughly enjoyed my job. The French department was brand new and it was exciting to be a part of its creation. The school trusted us, and allowed us a great deal of freedom in how we wanted to design the curriculum. In my third year at the school, a young Muslim woman from Madagascar applied for a job in the French department. While her family was originally from India, she had grown up in Madagascar – an old French colony – and her entire schooling had been in French. I was asked to attend her interview to ensure that her French was ‘good enough’. As a second-language
speaker faced with a woman whose claims to ‘nativeness’ were illegitimised through the act of requiring my stamp of approval, I felt deeply uncomfortable. She was hired and soon joined our team but, as I found out later, was offered a much lower salary than that of the European teachers. As the years passed, and more French teachers arrived, I switched my attention to English teaching, as I had grown increasingly more interested in the students’ ambivalent relationships with the language, in the ways in which I was recurrently positioned as the ultimate fountain of knowledge for all questions about English, and in the stark contrast between the opportunities that lay ahead for these students learning not only English but also French, and the struggles of the tiny Gujarati-medium government school in the village behind our campus, whose English teacher was also the *chai-wallah* who served tea to our teachers every morning.

I share these details not only as a way to contextualise my interest in the subject of this thesis. I share them because, as vulnerable as it feels to share such personal details, they are crucial to the crux of my argument. Recounting my own experience shines a light onto a maze of open and closed doors, on to the people who try to move between them, and the resources they draw on to do so. It calls attention to the limits and ease of mobility – be it social or geographical – for differently positioned actors. It forces us to reckon with global structures that allow people like me to move freely – on a whim – across continents. It prompts us to think about how bodies move differently through the world, how authority is allocated not only to unequally distributed resources but also to *people*. It compels us ask how people come to mobilise their languages for social mobility, as well as who, to what extent, and with what consequences.

My fieldwork took place two years after I left my job in Gujarat, over 1000 kilometres away in the capital city, and in a very different institution. I had planned, initially, to return to my school in Gujarat for fieldwork, but a combination of personal and academic reasons encouraged me to look elsewhere. Rather fortuitously, my supervisor was contacted by the NGO that I would eventually end up working with, who were searching for academics to help them improve their programme. While this appeared to me at the time rather a stroke of pure luck, it soon became apparent that this opportunity which had fallen into my lap had less to do with chance, and more to do with
the continued colonial dynamics that lead organisations in the Global South to bolster their work and status and legitimise their existence through associations with researchers and professionals from prominent institutions in the Global North – much as had occurred, if I reflect upon it, when I gained employment at the school in Gujarat in 2012. The NGO programme, I would later find out, was an educational endeavour, providing a year of free English, soft skills and personality development training to Indian teenagers and adults as part of drive to combat un(der)employment in Delhi and other parts of North India. The target audience of the NGO were those who had been otherwise denied access to what the NGO understood as ‘quality’ English education (which was frequently compared to the ostensibly ‘low’ quality English education provided by government schools), perceived as necessary for access to jobs and to the higher echelons of society. The NGO is not alone in understanding English as a key means of upward mobility. Indeed, Chidambaram’s Facebook post and the ensuing comments draw attention to the multiple anxieties around teaching and learning English in India, to how English becomes embroiled in discussions over education, mobility and what it means to be Indian. While the colonial history of the language fuels a great deal of this conflict, part of this anxiety is also deeply rooted in class-based divides that are reflected and reproduced in the English vs. vernacular medium divide in education (Ramanathan 2005, 2007), that is, how English-medium education remains almost uniquely confined to expensive private schools. Through such class-based education divides, English becomes part and parcel of the performance of and belonging to the middle classes (Fernandes 2006) and contributes to the hierarchisation of Indian society. English comes to be seen as the ultimate resource that opens doors to jobs and prosperity (Duchêne & Heller 2012) for those who have it and holds back those who do not (Proctor 2014). This immense power that has been discursively attributed to English thus shapes the language as a tool that bestows its power indiscriminately upon its speakers. But the students in the NGO were equally aware that their English competency was not their only obstacle. They knew all too well the struggles they faced on the labour market, at university and in society more widely. Along with anxiety over their English skills, they juggled with caste stigma and official government categorisations, concerns for the young women about marrying into a family that would not allow them to
work or study, rising right-wing Islamophobia, stereotypes that painted those from village backgrounds as ‘backwards’, and financial instability. I spent over three months visiting these classes daily, curious to see how, and indeed if, the students and their teachers imagined that English could combat the range of social and material issues that they faced.

The existence of such programmes is not unique to India. A wealth of literature has explored language-based employability initiatives around the world, from e.g., Switzerland (Flubacher, Duchêne & Coray 2018), Spain (Pujolar 2008; Codó and Garrido 2014), Canada (Allan 2013, 2016), and Belgium (Van Hoof, Nyssen & Kanobana 2020), demonstrating how they are entangled within neoliberal discourses that shape students as the entrepreneurs of their own lives in ways that often gloss over systemic discrimination in the labour market. While the ideological foundations of these programmes, as I will show, share intrinsic similarities, the NGO I worked with differs from these in a nuanced way. This NGO programme is not targeted at migrants; it is not seeking to assist newcomers to the country. The NGO provides language training to Indian citizens who, for a host of complex reasons, it understands as being ill-equipped for success within Indian society. If, as much research has shown, employability programmes for migrants are often attempts to encourage integration into the host society, then this begs the question of what these Indian students are being asked to integrate into, if not the India that they are already a part of. What are these students being asked to do – to become – in the pursuit of social mobility?

When considered this way, we are able to see how the training provided by the NGO is not only about acquiring a language. Indeed, that social mobility requires much more than the language of prestige is tacitly acknowledged by the NGO. They provide this language training with an understanding that English alone is not enough. As I was told by the CEO, English is only one third of what we do. With a curriculum developed in collaboration with Indian and Western researchers, and heavily influenced through Western ELT pedagogy, the NGO seeks not only to teach English, but also soft skills and personality development. Through soft skills training, students are taught critical thinking, grit, growth mindset and an aptitude for lifelong learning; through personality development, the NGO seeks to inculcate in the students a particular set of values and bodily behaviour. The
implication, then, is that these students are not only insufficiently equipped to succeed because of their English competency, but that they are lacking in a whole range of what we could consider cultural capital, or a specific postcolonial, middle-class, neoliberal habitus, which makes them unlikely contenders for success in Modern India. To be sure, this provides us with further evidence of the neoliberalisation of education, of how students across the globe are exhorted to envision themselves as “bundles of skills” (Urciuoli 2008) in order to make themselves competitive on the job market. But this only provides a partial answer. I opt for the term social mobility in this thesis – as opposed to employability, for example – precisely because employment is only one element of what draws these students towards English. While neoliberalism has been a dominant and fruitful lens through which scholars have explored these processes, upon inspection, what we see is a nuanced picture of competing and co-existing logics, of which neoliberalism is only one part, that explain why these students turn towards English, and what they hope to gain from and through it – that is, what social mobility means. Social mobility is a term that appears widely throughout scholarship on the sociology of India (see e.g. Osella & Osella 2000; Sharma 2019; Vaid 2018) and, while not always named as such, concepts akin to social mobility have formed a key part of the history of nation-building in postcolonial India. With the abolition of untouchability and the developmental, modernisation mindset of the newly independent government led by Nehru, ideals of progress and mobility began to gain traction (Osella & Osella 2000; Deshpande 2011), and in theory, the traditional lack of mobility as dictated by the caste system (but see Chapter 2 for further nuance on this point) began to be questioned. Social mobility forms a key element of the reservation/quota system (see Chapter 2) put in place for what the government has identified as Scheduled Tribes and Castes (‘tribal’ groups (adivasis) and the ex-‘untouchables’) and Other Backward Classes. The welfare of these groups is the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, whose objective is to address what they term the economic, educational and social “backwardness” of certain caste groups. As such, with terms such as ‘progress’, ‘backwardness’ and ‘empowerment’, the notion of social mobility has been a constant, pressing discussion for India, one which has gained further traction since the implementation of neoliberal economic policies at the end of the 20th century.
which gave birth to India’s own version of enterprise culture (Gooptu 2013). The term social mobility, then, allows me to think about how young Indians seek to find for themselves ‘better’ positions, how this project may be hampered by not only economic but also social processes, and – most importantly – it allows me to treat social mobility as an unanswered question. That is, it allows me to ask what social mobility looks like to young Indians, and how English becomes embedded within a mobility imaginary. This can only be captured, I argue, when we turn our attention to specific actors, with their particular social positioning and life trajectories, and the range of webs of social inequality in which they are caught.

The NGO has identified a problem – un(der)employment – and provides what they understand as a solution. As I develop further in Chapter 4, the CEO began his philanthropic mission with ‘soup kitchens’ across Delhi, but soon grew frustrated at the lack of lasting impact that this would bring to people’s lives. He continued with the soup kitchens, but embarked upon another endeavour that, he believed, would give young, impoverished Indians the opportunity to get ‘better jobs’ or, as the website explains, would make them “effective in the white-collar workplace”. For this, they have identified English skills, “personality enhancement” and a “passion for lifelong learning” as the solution. Through the mission of the CEO, we see an echo of Chidambaram’s assumptions that language is the key to mobility, but equally, that language alone is not sufficient – personality development, and a particular educational subjectivity, are necessary, too. I hasten to add that NGO management are under no illusions; they remain highly aware that they run an imperfect programme, within highly unjust conditions, and they constantly adapt to problems as and when they appear. I have a profound respect for the organisers and teachers: they are committed to their students and take critique seriously. Their dedication and motivation notwithstanding, my interest has been in the effects of this programme. Not, that is, in the effectiveness, or the extent to which students really do find success afterwards, but rather in the consequences of this programme on how students understand their own social mobility, their experiences of social stratification, and the possibilities of/through English. Above all, this thesis seeks to understand how disenfranchised students in Delhi come to invest in English
as a means for (assumed) social mobility. To do this, there are several sub-questions that have helped me build up to the wider argument:

- What counts as ‘English’ for those in the NGO?
- How is English constructed as a ‘powerful’ language, for what, and for whom?
- What discourses, logics and circumstances are these discourses about English enabled and framed by?
- What do students consider themselves to gain through the process of becoming English speakers? What does it mean, for these students, to be an ‘English speaker’ in Modern India?

Through these questions, I explore how students’ social positioning leads them to imagine what ‘good’ and ‘bad’ English are, thus contributing to scholarly debates about the coloniality of “unequal Englishes” (Tupas 2015) to encompass an exploration of how internal forms of social stratification of class and caste mediate students’ relationality with the language. I ask what these students imagine English can do for them, as well as who is included and excluded from such imaginaries. I ask how far students invest in such discourses, and why, if not, they continue to invest in English. Ultimately, I seek to show not only how the English-for-social-mobility discourse is slippery and complex, but also how it gains traction through a web of multiple discourses, which the students try to navigate as they seek to become English speakers.

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It has felt, at times this year, that these are perhaps not the most pressing questions of the moment. From the COVID-19 outbreak to the Black Lives Matter movement, this year has been one of monumental, global struggle. And yet, while on the surface these may appear only tangentially related to the topic of this thesis, they have shone light on the crux of what this study is about. The coronavirus pandemic has devastated India, throwing into sharp focus the vast gulfs of inequality that have left millions with no work, no housing and no medical support. At the time of writing, cases are rising in
India daily, with no sign of abating. Private schools were able to continue online learning, safe in the assumption that students would have devices, electricity and Internet access at home. Government schools have been unable to do very much at all. The fallout will be disastrous, and the already high levels of unemployment and precarious employment are likely to increase. In times of national economic distress, will these students be able to capitalise on the training they have undertaken? As stable jobs become scarcer, who will and will not be protected from unemployment? What will young Indians require to successfully navigate an increasingly more competitive labour market?

The Black Lives Matter movement, too, has provoked a tense conversation in India and across the diaspora, as Dalit activists have called for solidarity with BLM, prompting a critical reassessment of how the caste system functions to oppress Dalits in ways that echo anti-black racism. By raising questions of the extent to which education, cultural capital and employment can protect stigmatised bodies from harm, the BLM movement has allowed for a wider discussion on the caste system in India that has struggled to find a voice in the mainstream, and that has consistently been erased from dominant discourses (see Chapters 2 & 7). Not all are in agreement: these are tense, bitter conversations. But the events of 2020 are forcing many to reckon with the sources, systems and structures of inequality, the continued reproduction thereof through seemingly progressive measures, and the need for a radical rethinking of how to create alternatives. But to do so, I argue, we need first of all to understand the complexities of social organisation. In what follows, I aim to provide a nuanced picture of how inequality and social mobility function in India, and how marginalised young Indians attempt to struggle with and against them.

In the next chapter, I provide contextual background that situates this study within particular historical and societal conditions, addressing salient moments where English has been involved in discursive struggles in India, and outlining my conceptualisation of social stratification – caste and class – in India. While this is framed as ‘context’, it nevertheless also provides an

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1 Dalit (‘broken’ or ‘oppressed’ in Sanskrit) is the preferred term for members of what were previously known as the ‘untouchable’ castes, who continue to suffer from severe economic and social oppression in India.
outline of key analytical concepts and literature that guide my analysis. In
Chapter 3, I provide the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the
thesis and expand on further theoretical and conceptual tools that I have
mobilised in tandem with those addressed in Chapter 2. Chapter 4 details the
methodological justification for the study and the data collection and analysis.
To gain a holistic understanding of how and why these students turn towards
English for social mobility, I have built my analysis in a way that makes it
possible first of all to see the discursive construction of ‘good’ English
(Chapter 5), asking how the students’ particular positioning shapes their
relationality to the language, before addressing how this notion of ‘good
English’ is constructed as powerful, for what and for whom (Chapter 6).
Chapters 7 and 8 elaborate further on some of the themes raised in Chapter 6
to explore them in more detail. For Chapter 7, this involves an interrogation
of the language-as-skill or resource discourse within the context of the
neoliberalisation of education, as well as a focus on the extent to which the
students invest in, or struggle against, discourses of social-mobility-through-
English, and how this is embedded in the wider political economy of
(neo)liberal India. Arguing that the neoliberalisation of education only partly
answers the question of why students turn towards English, in Chapter 8 I
look at what these particular students believe English can do not only for them
but to them – that is, how it works as an agent of transformation of the self.
Thus, while the chapters address a range of different concepts, I ultimately
hope to show how they are all intricately connected within the larger
discourse of English for social mobility.
Chapter 2 - Language, class and caste in India

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3 I argue for the importance of taking history and political economy into account for making sense of current practices. As such, in this present chapter, I provide a contextual overview of key moments in Indian history, as well as sociological concepts, that are imperative to understanding the situations of my participants. While presented as a ‘context’, I have chosen to approach this as a genealogical and analytical endeavour, as I understand ‘writing context’ to necessarily be a selective, interpretive, theorised process, even when it is not presented as such.

In this chapter, I seek to firstly map the salient moments in which English has been enmeshed in struggles throughout India’s history, moments which shed light on how English has come to ‘mean’ what it does in contemporary India. This involves tracing not only its colonial history, the struggles over language and the nation in postcolonial India and the creation of a stratified education system, but also the ways in which the study of English – and languages more widely – has contributed in lasting ways to its ideological representations. I do this partly as a means of acknowledging how these fields have contributed to the construction of the object of English, and partly to document how my own scholarly journey has shifted from an interest in ‘English’ as an object, to a focus embodied practices, inequality, discourse and ideology. As I demonstrate in the latter part of the chapter, such a recalibration of focus requires an interrogation of the shifting political economic make-up of India, and of the various “interanimating” (Chun 2019) strands of privilege and stratification. As such, the second half of this chapter turns to a theorisation of caste, class and their interplay, before exploring strategies of middle-classness, and the role of English therein.

2.2 A brief history of English as an object of study

It is rather a truism to state that the history of English on the Indian subcontinent is long, complex and deeply imbricated in power dynamics that have shifted throughout changing political economic circumstances. Given the centuries of colonisation, an analysis of how English is taken up and engaged with in India today must be situated in the social and historical
conditions through which it came to be part of India, as this history has undoubtedly shaped not only the material existence and distribution of English in India but equally its symbolic meaning. There exist multiple studies of the history of English in India which provide much more comprehensive accounts than I do here, and which I have found extremely helpful (see e.g. Sinha 1978). However, the importance of this historical research notwithstanding, I am cautious of what is overlooked or skewed by accounts that document the history of English in India, in that, through a focus on the language itself, there is a risk of reifying ‘English’ as a quasi-animate being, as a disembodied language travelling through space and time. Such a narrative sits uncomfortably within what I have come to see as a primary goal of this study: to look at English not as an external entity in and of itself, but rather as a discursively constructed object that must be approached – if we are to understand how language is engaged in the reproduction of power dynamics – via a focus on embodied speakers and their circumstances. Further, there is a risk in such accounts of producing a linear, homogenous story – of creating the impression that English is not only a ‘thing’, but also a ‘thing’ with a singular history. As this thesis seeks to demonstrate, English is more productively perceived for the analyst not as an object but rather as a discursive site of tension, with multiple, contested (social) meanings – albeit meanings that have histories – that are mobilised by different speakers for different purposes. As such, in the first part of this chapter, rather than mapping out a historical tracing of the language’s ‘journey’ to and within India, I attempt instead to highlight particular moments, relevant to the purposes of this study, in which English (and indeed other languages) have been discursively constructed and mobilised by Indians and their colonisers within political and discursive struggles, in order to trace the historicity of how speakers engage with the concept of ‘English’ today, and the germination(s) of the ideological semiosis of English in contemporary India. Taking a cue from scholars who highlight the importance of examining how we, as scholars, have shaped our own objects of research through our own ideological positionings and political economic conditions (Heller & McElhinny 2017; Nakassis & Annamalai 2020), I endeavour too to trace how English has come to be constructed and studied – and therefore shaped as a scholarly object – throughout the history of our field, and how this, in turn,
has impacted upon how ‘English’ comes to be viewed and interacted with today.

2.2.1 Colonial education
The colonial ‘encounter’ is a crucial moment in which English was mobilised in struggles over dominance. Drawing on Shukla (1996), Proctor (2010) notes that colonisation represented a shift in the educational practices that existed prior to, and in the early days of, British occupation – that is, an education which was localised and often organised “along the lines of the social roles prescribed” for different castes (Annamalai 2005:20). While colonial education policies centralised education, there were numerous debates over its execution (ibid), particularly over the use of English, which became the object of disputes between the colonial rulers – such as the orientalist vs anglicist dispute regarding the medium of education for Indians (see e.g. Annamalai 2005; Evans 2002; Pennycook 1998) – that were based, fundamentally, on the purposes and benefits of an English education as a means to “facilitate colonial rule” (Pennycook 1998:20). It was not until the early- to mid-19th century that English education came to be institutionalised in India, following the implementation of several policies that were heavily influenced by discourses of the superiority of English for science, education and modernisation, evident in Macaulay’s well-cited ‘Minute on Education’ (1835):

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, --a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population (para.34)

The motivation behind English education for colonised Indians was thus the creation of a class of ‘go-betweens’ who would not only ‘interpret’ between the governors and the governed, but equally would ‘enrich’ indigenous knowledge through the ‘science’ made accessible through the English language. This formed part of the moral obligation to impart European
knowledge that the colonisers understood as integral to their mission “to bring enlightenment to backward peoples” (Pennycook 1998:191). One would be mistaken to believe, if one was so inclined, that this was an act of arrogant generosity on the behalf of the colonisers. As Macaulay made evident in an earlier speech to the British House of Commons (1833), the objective of such education was ultimately the consolidation of British dominance and a smoother and more lucrative ‘exchange’ for the rulers: “To trade with civilised men is infinitely more profitable than to govern savages” (para.1d). Education for the Indian population thus served several purposes: “It was a means to produce a well-ordered, docile and co-operative population, but it was also a moral and imperial duty to bring to the Indian population the benefits of European knowledge” (Pennycook 1998:75; Annamalai 2005).

It is important to highlight that the plan for English education was only meant for a small number of Indians: the British government had no intention of providing English education for the masses. As such, we see during the colonial period the emergence of an educational system stratified by language, through which only certain Indians were selected for English education and thus made eligible for the ‘benefits’ made accessible through such education. Among the many Charter Acts which legalised and institutionalised British rule, the act of 1853 founded the Civil Service and, in theory, granted permission to Indians to gain employment through a system of examinations, although, in practice, this took a long while to be put in place and successful entrances were few and far between for many years (see Compton (1967:99) on the “conflict between professed intentions and practical reality”). The following year, English was deemed the language of Higher Education through Wood’s Dispatch (1854), also known as the Magna Carta of English Education in India. As such, a new generation of English-speaking Indians – an administrative class – was created as English became the dominant language used in administration, the military, jurisdiction and higher education (Mukherjee 2007:165). As Leela Fernandes (2006) notes, the (limited) opportunities provided through colonial educational policy were the only means for an Indian middle class to develop, given how colonisation did not allow for industrialisation, which could have potentially led to an industrial middle class. Indians with the means and aspiration for mobility within the colonial structure thus had to “rely on [colonial] education as a
means of achieving access to employment and economic power” (ibid:4). This new social group – the colonial Indian middle class, distinguished primarily by its English education – thus sat in “an uneasy relationship both with traditional elites as well as with other less privileged segments of the middle classes, particularly the vernacular, lower middle classes” (ibid:5) as “new forms of distinctions” emerged “between English-educated elites dominant in the Presidency towns of Calcutta and Bombay and various tiers of the regional elites, such as the landed middle class and vernacular elites in other towns” (ibid). These distinctions were consolidated throughout the 19th century and, as Fernandes argues:

These [English-educated] rising groups became actively invested in the reproduction of the language of colonial rule because their socioeconomic position rested on the social, cultural, and economic capital associated with colonial educational training and state employment (ibid:5)

Fernandes thus demonstrates how the colonial period, through education, led to the formation of the Indian middle classes, and defined language – English – as a crucial factor of belonging.

There are several factors of note in this brief overview of colonial education. Firstly, we see the positing of a hierarchy of languages, imposed by the colonisers and their racist, orientalising and modernist views of civilised languages and peoples, and later assimilated by English-educated Indians who invested in the colonial enterprise. These colonial processes are the precursor to contemporary educational structures, in which the distribution of language plays a vital role in the stratification of Indian society and in the formation of the middle classes (Fernandes 2006). More importantly, however, is the framing of English as a tool for individual betterment, and the ideological framing – which, as we will see in later chapters, exists still today – of languages as reflecting moral value, discipline and national characteristics which can be imparted to its speakers. As I argue in the next section, a crucial shaping factor in the promulgation of such language ideologies was linguistic scholarship itself.
2.2.2 Colonial linguistics

While debates over colonial education often directly concerned English, much of the linguistic work undertaken by the colonisers was more interested in the documentation of indigenous languages. While it is beyond the scope of the thesis to address this in detail, it is nonetheless important to map the salient aspects of how colonial technologies such as language surveys shaped approaches to language, as such approaches continue to hold ideological sway over the conception of languages, including English, and of linguistic diversity more generally, in India (and indeed elsewhere) today.

One of most well-known works of this period is that of Grierson, in particular the Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) (1903-1928), which sought to “capture the spoken languages and dialects of British India as part of the wider goal of the colonial government to learn, through bureaucratic documentation, about the social makeup of its subjects” (Carlan, 2018:97). Much like the general census, Grierson’s thorough documentation of Indian languages – which discounted speaker’s own perceptions of their languages as ‘not real data’ (Nakassis & Annamalai 2020) - is exemplary of the technologies of population management, regulation, and knowledge production (Duchene & Humbert 2018) embedded within colonial governmentality (Foucault 1991). In her examination of the LSI, Carlan demonstrates how the objectification of language “as a natural object” led to “essentialized portraits of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ languages”, characteristics that were then transferred to its speakers’ “intellectual capacities” (2018:101). This colonial discourse reinforced “essentializing relationships between language, ethnicity and personhood” (ibid:118), through processes of classification which “involved the transformation of ‘fuzzy’ communities into ‘enumerated’ ethnic identities, that elevated ethnicity as a category to be compared and ranked in scales of relative ‘backwardness’” (ibid:106; see also Chakrabarty 1994). These were “not only shaped by, but also predicated on, the racialising logics of colonial ethnology that preceded it” (ibid) and adhered to “Herderian language ideologies equating languages with peoples with territories” (Nakassis & Annamalai 2020:7; see also Bauman & Briggs 2003). As we will see in Chapter 5, this remains a dominant lens through which languages are understood in India, including by the participants in this study.
Furthermore, as Nakassis and Annamalai argue, this was not simply a case of documenting a pre-existing linguistic diversity but rather, “it also entailed it into being” (2020:5). As such, the effect of colonial technologies such as the LSI was “to reify a linguistic and ethnological geography and to institutionalize its classifications and divisions.” (ibid) This has had long-lasting effects on modern India, most notably in the aftermath of independence in 1947, as these categorisations and ideological associations of language and peoples have been mobilised on multiple occasions in political language projects, as well as by academics, who have often made recourse to Grierson’s survey as data (Nakassis & Annamalai 2020; Carlan 2018). As such, this “form of knowing and constructing linguistic diversity” was “substantive” (Nakassis & Annamalai 2020:6), in that it has had real, material impacts on how language in India has been mobilised for political means. This is evident, for example, in the 2014 creation of the state of Telangana, which was fuelled by a language separatist movement of Telugu speakers. Communities in India thus continue today to be constructed “along linguistic lines laid out in the LSI” (Carlan 2018:106).

This is not only important for understanding how English and languages more widely are understood and ideologically shaped today, but is also crucial in shedding light on how “academics’ ideologies (or theories) of language have entailments on their objects of study” (Nakassis & Annamalai 2020). Our interventions, our production of knowledge as scholars have tangible impacts upon non-academic fields – although the boundary between the two is often blurred – and our own understanding of data is shaped by our own ideological positionings, trajectories and political economic circumstances (Heller & McElhinny 2017). As Edward Said writes, “the social world [studied] includes the person or subject doing the studying as well as the object or realm being studied” (1985:90 my emphasis) and thus it is imperative for the producer of knowledge to be included explicitly in the recounting of the process. While it is certainly an easier task to turn our gaze to the past to uncover the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpinned the work of our predecessors, it is also crucial for us to direct that gaze upon our own work and to remain vigilant of and accountable to the assumptions we bring, while also acknowledging “the difficulty in gaining critical distance from the political economic conditions of our own knowledge.
production” (Heller, 2020:3). It is for this reason that this chapter is not only a brief mapping of common approaches to studying ‘English in India’ but also a tracing of my own scholarly journey as I have moved between subfields, from an interest in World Englishes and ‘Indian English’ as object, to a critical sociolinguistic interrogation of language, ideology and political economy (see Chapter 3). This, I believe, allows the reader not only to understand the framing of my interests and questions as they have developed over time, but equally to flag up the ideological blind-spots that emerge from my own positioning and history, particularly given my Britishness, my whiteness, and my ‘native-speakeriness’.

2.2.3 Indian independence and struggles over language
As alluded to above, in the final years of the struggle for independence and in the decades that followed, the question of language was brought to the foreground by many leaders. Mahatma Gandhi, for example, was vocal in his campaign against English as the main educational language for students, preferring instead a pan-Indian replacement such as Hindustani, and the Angrezi Hatao (Remove English) movement led by Rammanohar battled to uproot the colonisers’ language from India completely. As Proctor has noted:

> Based on the vast numbers of people who spoke it, the nationalistic ideology surrounding it, and the representation of Hindi speakers in the freedom movement, Hindi was projected as the “raštriya bhaṣa,” the national language. Gandhi encouraged all freedom fighters to learn Hindi, and to teach it to as many people as they could, to spread the national language—along with the nationalist ideology. The two went hand-in-hand. (2010:70)

Thus, echoing the colonial linguistics explored in the previous section, we see here how the tensions between the two dominant languages (in the north, at least) – Hindi and English – came to represent tensions between the people they were constructed as representing, their ‘identities’, their political and moral values, and their ideologies. The newly independent government thus had an extremely tense issue to address. After much deliberation, the government named Hindi as the official language of the country (1950), with the caveat that English would be temporarily used for official purposes for
fifteen years, to allow for a smooth transition into Hindi. Nevertheless, once the deadline for the removal of English had arrived, it was met with great hostility, with “riots, wanton arson and loots in many districts of the South” (Sinha 1978:138), as Hindi was (and is still) not used by the vast majority of the population in the South. Thus, for some non-Hindi speakers, retaining English was preferable to projecting one Indian language (and by ideological extension, one Indian people) as superior to all the others. Following the social upheaval against Hindi and the anti-Hindi polemics which accompanied it, the government passed the Official Languages Act in 1963 (amended in 1967), which granted permanent status to English as an associate official language.

The fiery debates about English in India did not remain confined to the era of independence. To this day, the hegemony of English is far from ubiquitously supported and is deeply enmeshed in struggles over representations of the nation, between modernity-driven discourses that frame India’s success on a global stage as hinging on the nations’ ability to speak English, and a conflicting, but coexisting, discourse that “equates Hindi with the nation” (LaDousa 2014:91). It is this latter discourse which has been mobilised most aggressively by supporters of Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (the current government), who, during their rise to power in the 1990s, rejected English “as a language alien to India, bringing with it many inappropriate ideas and practices” (LaDousa 2014:89). As LaDousa observes, their anti-English rhetoric has subsided somewhat in the last two decades, very likely due to their recognition of the increasing investment in English on the part of much of their target voter base (the Hindi-speaking middle classes). But Hindutva as an ideology continues to gain traction, evident in the recent Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), which seeks to grant fast-track citizenship to Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Christian and Parsi immigrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh who arrived before 2014. The primary contention is the notable – and intentional – exclusion of Muslim immigrants from the list, and as such it has sparked widespread protests, and was responsible for fomenting mass, organised violence against Muslims across Delhi in particular.

In an attempt to ease tensions over the institutionalisation of languages in the first decades of independence, the government introduced the three-language formula, initially passed into law in 1968 and modified on several
occasions since. The law states that all schools must teach Hindi, English and a regional language, although the extent to which this programme has been successful is also widely debated (LaDousa 2014:72-73; Annamalai 2005). Tamil Nadu, a state in South India, for example, has refused to follow the formula, and many schools, especially private schools, opt for a combination of English, Hindi and another modern foreign language such as French. The three-language formula is heavily tied up in the debate over medium of instruction in India, and what Ramanathan (2005) has called the English-medium/vernacular-medium divide. As most English-medium schools are private, and charge high fees, such education remains out of the grasp of the vast majority of Indians, thus contributing to the reproduction of social inequality. For North India at least – where this research took place – these national disputes over language education and institutionalisation have had the effect of creating a political binary, or a two-party struggle for contention, between Hindi and English as the two dominant languages, albeit in different ways. These languages have come to represent distinct notions of education, of the nation, of their speakers. As LaDousa argues:

Two languages – Hindi and English – have come to stand as options in the educational system of Hindi-speaking northern India. Hindi- and English-medium schools call into play difference in massive test-taking regimes, the price of school attendance, and feelings about what it means to live in a nation. (2014:183)

But while English and Hindi were recurrently pitted against one another – and still are – in struggles over the definition of the Indian nation-state (a process which erases the many regional languages, and hundreds of non-standardised languages), debate was also sparked in the postcolonial era over internal differentiation within English itself. In the next section, I examine the rise of a postcolonial linguistics that occupied itself primarily with debates over the ownership of English in relation to postcolonial ‘varieties’ – a tracing which echoes in many ways my own entry point into this subject area. I then sketch out the reasons why I have chosen to adopt an alternative approach to the discussion of English in India.
2.2.4 Postcolonial linguistics

A common interest of a great deal of (Applied) Linguistics at the end of the 20th and early 21st century lay in tracking the evolution of so-called ‘New Englishes’, sometimes in accordance with developmental models. Among the more influential developmental models is Schneider’s Dynamic Model (2003), which loosely divides the development process into five stages. According to this model, the first stage begins with English arriving in India with British traders (circa 1600) and, more systematically, shortly thereafter, through the East India Company, in a period that Sedlatschek (2009) refers to as transplantation, or what Schneider (2003) calls the foundation phase. As the East India Company’s domination grew more entrenched following the Battle of Plassey (1757), and then still further following the imposition of direct rule from Britain in the aftermath of the Indian Revolt (1857–8), English became more commonplace across various domains of life in India, in ways that reaffirmed British authority and embedded the roots of the language in the country. English had by then become the dominant language of administration and, to a certain extent, of education too. For Mukherjee, this period represents the “exonormative stabilization” (2007:165) phase of Schneider’s Dynamic Model. That is, the phase in which (English) bilingualism becomes more common among the indigenous population, “through education or increased contacts” (Schneider 2003:246). It is also at this stage that “the earliest structural features typical of local usage emerge, if only slowly” (ibid:247). This phase then transitions into a “nativization” phase, during which time the language becomes increasingly indigenised, mostly at a lexi-co-grammatical level (ibid:249). For India, Mukherjee (2007) pinpoints this phase as being from 1835 to the beginning of the twentieth century, as groups of Indians formed what Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, referred to as “a new class, which was to grow all over India, a class influenced by western thought and ways and rather cut off from the mass of the population” (1946:319, cited in Mukherjee 2007:166). According to Schneider’s model, as the language becomes more deeply entrenched in the lives of (a certain part of) the indigenous population, one reaches what he calls the phase of “endonormative stabilization”, during which time new linguistic norms are established, before the final phase of “differentiation”, which sees a range of indigenous varieties emerge.
It is the ‘endonormative stabilization’ phase which drew a great deal of interest from scholars interested in the (unequal) global spread of English. Most famously, Braj B. Kachru brought Indian English and other New Varieties of English to the attention of linguists in the latter half of the 20th century. The field of World Englishes was born, and over time did a great deal to help establish Indian English (as well as other New Englishes) within Sociolinguistics as a socio-culturally legitimate variety of English. Most notably, Kachru’s *Three Circles of English* (1985) categorises varieties of English into three types: *Inner Circle* (the traditional ‘native speaker’ countries such as the UK and the USA), *Outer Circle* (countries where English is not viewed as a ‘native’ language but plays an important institutional role, such as India, Hong Kong, Nigeria) and *Expanding Circle* (countries with no institutional tradition in the language, such as Russia). Varieties in the Outer Circle are considered to be ‘norm-developing’ as opposed to ‘norm-dependent’, meaning that they are no longer fully dependent, it is argued, on the language norms that emanate from the Inner Circle. As such, numerous studies mapping the structural, lexical, morphemic etc. features flourished in an attempt to document this elusive ‘Indian English’ (see e.g., Sedlatschek 2009; Lange 2012; Sailaja 2012).

Alongside research that mapped the structure of the variety appeared a great deal of studies on how English is perceived in India, and the extent to which it is considered an ‘Indian’ language (Dasgupta 1993; D’Souza 2001; Krishnaswami and Burde 2004 [1998]), as well as a wide range of attitudinal research documenting the changing perspectives of ‘Indian English’ in India over the last few decades (Kachru 1976; Sahgal 1991; Hohenthal 2003; Sheorey 2006; Kaushik 2011; Bernaisch & Koch 2016). Such findings have often been contradictory, and, moreover, rather problematic, particularly given the over-representation of highly educated, upper-middle class Indians as participants. Furthermore, Sahgal provides the vague definition of “Ordinary Indian English” as “generally used by educated Indians in everyday conversations” (1991:301), so it is difficult to speculate on what the participants actually envisage through this term, especially as there is conflation of spoken and written language, and it is often not mentioned (with the exception of Kaushik’s study) under which circumstances the participants would prefer a specific variety (i.e. in education, with friends, at work). It is important to note
here that ‘Indian English’ is not a formally standardised variety, meaning that the term is often used to cover a very wide range of linguistic practices. In his discussion of basilectal and acrolectal varieties of English in India, Mukherjee (2007) draws on a range of examples of Indian English to demonstrate the sheer difficulty of delineating what is signified by the term. Indeed, Balasubramanian concludes: “a definition of Indian English is as elusive as a definition of any other variety of English such as British or American English. There are simply too many variables to neatly define the English used in India as a single variety” (2009:233). Thus, while the term ‘Indian English’ is linguistically meaningless, what is of interest here is how students themselves construct and engage (or not) with the notion (see Chapter 5). That is, I interrogate “what counts as language in this particular context” as well as “how language counts” (Lorente 2018:3, see also Blommaert 2010:12) and, I add, for whom.

2.2.5 From English to speakers
Kachru’s work contributed in important ways to the critical reassessment of deeply rooted assumptions in discourses of the global spread of English. In his well-known rebuttal to Randolph Quirk, Kachru (1976) criticised Quirk for his language purism – a notion which, as Brunstad demonstrates, had “considerable influence on the development of European standard languages” (2003:52). Language purism, as the rejection – institutionalised or otherwise – of “‘impure’ material of foreign ancestry” (ibid:54) was identified by Kachru as one of the “seven attitudinal sins” within ELT. For Kachru, such attitudes were not only intolerant, but “theoretically suspect” (1976:221). Kachru thus fought for the legitimisation of ways of speaking English in postcolonial contexts that deviated from what many considered to be standard – or ‘pure’ – English. While Kachru himself did not, to my knowledge, draw on the work of Bourdieu, we can see parallels here with Bourdieu’s writings on legitimate language, through which particular languages or practices – in this case, varieties – come to be ‘legitimised’, that is, accepted as the dominant and superior form, in a hierarchical relationship with other competing forms. Legitimisation, for Bourdieu, while often taken for granted, requires “continuous creation” in order to “impose the legitimate mode of expression”, and “ensure the permanence of the legitimate language
and of its value, that is, of the recognition accorded to it” (1991:58). Discourses of purity, of course, are one way in which authority can be attributed to a particular variety. Kachru’s work, then, can be seen as an attempt to struggle against this imposition, to redefine what counts as ‘legitimate English’.

However, there are limits to the utility of Kachru’s work for this thesis. As I demonstrate in Chapter 5, while purity discourses may have been debunked in certain academic fields and while, as Pennycook argues, there is a common trend within liberal discourses “to pronounce that [English] is no longer tied to its insular origins” (1998:190), the purity and perceived ancestry of languages remains a clear lens through which the participants of this study understood not only English – or ‘good’ English – but their other languages too. This raises questions, as I address in Chapter 5, of how differently positioned individuals, through their life experiences, are able to reject such discourses, and why. That is, while the linguistic insecurity (Bourdieu 1977b) that stems from speaking non-legitimised languages may be decreasing among the Indian English-speaking elite, it continued in full force for my participants, not only through the continued coloniality of the language, but due to internal hierarchies within India along caste and class lines that shape their habitus. This is where Bourdieu’s theorisation of legitimate discourse is more insightful than Kachru’s work. Bourdieu reminds us that the legitimate discourse is not simply a case of the legitimate language – rather, legitimate discourse must also meet further criteria:

- it is uttered by a legitimate speaker, i.e. by the appropriate person, as opposed to the impostor (religious language/priest, poetry/poet, etc.); it is uttered in a legitimate situation, i.e. on the appropriate market (as opposed to insane discourse, e.g. a surrealist poem read in the Stock Exchange) and addressed to legitimate receivers; it is formulated in the legitimate phonological and syntactic forms (what linguists call grammaticality), except when transgressing these norms is part of the legitimate definition of the legitimate producer” (1977b:650)

In this way, we are forced to ask questions not only of the variety which is legitimised (and upon what grounds) but also of those who are considered legitimate speakers. As I demonstrate in Chapters 5 and 6, the legitimisation of the ‘English speaker’ is one that is bound up not only in colonial terms, but
equally in terms of class and caste. Kachru not only overlooks such internal processes of stratification, but actively contributes to them through his suggestion that the new ‘legitimate’ model be “educated Indian English” (1976:235).

Furthermore, while Kachru’s concentric circles certainly provide one useful framework for understanding how English has developed since colonisation, the model and its underpinnings have been critiqued for not fully addressing the continued coloniality of English. Park warns of the potential risk of de-politicising English in the World Englishes (WE) framework, “as vitality of new Englishes is taken as evidence for neutralization of Western dominance, erasing still existing systemic inequalities between languages and societies” (2009:7). For Tupas and Rubdy, the notion of linguistic equality projected by fields such as WE and ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) has “divested the language of its colonial moorings” (2015:2). This has thus produced a false dichotomy of the colonial English of the past versus a postcolonial English of the present, and as such “has helped pave the way for the de-linking of the past from the present, and the de-linking of discourses about English then from discourses about English now” (ibid), that is, a glossing over of the continued coloniality of the language, or what Pennycook calls the “micropolitical operation of colonialism” (1998:24) that continues today through ELT. Arguing that we have been “seduced into celebrating our victories over English”, Tupas and Rubdy remind us of the importance of not forgetting how English continues to perpetuate and maintain “massive inequities” (2015:2). On a similar note, O’Regan takes ELF to task for its neglect of global structural constraints on the use of English(es):

There is a profound disconnect between the desire to identify and promote ‘ELF’ features and functions and the practical necessity of dealing with the structural iniquities of a global capitalism which will by default always distribute economic and linguistic resources in a way which benefits the few over the many and which confers especial prestige upon selective language forms (2014:540).

While Kubota acknowledges the contributions made by WE, she also argues that they sit within “a liberal intellectual tradition that celebrates diversity but
insufficiently addresses issues of power that produce and perpetuate inequalities and injustices among Englishes, groups of English users, and different languages” (2015:24). To regard varieties of English and their speakers as being on an equal footing – that is, as equally able to freely use and embrace their different ways of speaking without social consequences – is to adopt what Kubota (ibid) refers to as a “colorblind” stance which considers people from diverse backgrounds as being equal, while simultaneously masking group-based struggles and “obscuring unequal relations of power among them” (ibid:25). Furthermore, Saraceni argues that to categorise varieties by country, as the WE model does, is to assume that the distribution of languages and varieties adheres to man-made borders, which reifies the “essentialist frame which underpinned the rise of the nation-state ideology in eighteenth- and nineteenth- century Europe” (2015:196). To view Englishes through this framework is therefore to view individual experiences of the language as being inherently Indian, effacing the potential for internal tensions. The attitudinal studies referred to above, in adopting a largely quantitative approach and in attempting to uncover a general stance towards English and its Indian variety, contribute therefore to the reproduction of a seemingly unified general opinion, creating an impression that the attitudes of Indians – as a homogenous group – are changing and moving towards an embracing of ‘Indian English’. By attempting to capture an essential snapshot of the generalised ‘Indian’ experience of English, internal tensions, inequalities and ideological pluralities are overlooked and erased. To ignore the local, situated experiences of English speakers is to erase “the complexities emerging from the manner in which particular historical, sociocultural, economic, and political factors have shaped the realities of these speakers and their language use” (Rubdy et al 2008:46, see also Pennycook 1994). Indeed, in the ways in which English has often been researched on a global scale (and we see this through the selection of participants for the attitudinal studies), class-based differences are often overlooked (Tupas 2019), as the variety of English represented in the nation-based framework “tends to represent the socially, economically, and politically dominant segment of the population” (Kubota 2015:30). Thus, as Pennycook writes, the continued coloniality embedded in discourses of English (and English teaching) must continually be addressed,
but in ways that acknowledge how they “also sit in ever-changing relationships with other discourses’ (1998:7).

In a recent paper, Tupas laments that the focus within studies of English(es) across the world has been “more on what has happened to English itself and less on the enduring social materialist conditions under which such linguistic changes have occurred” (2020:229). As alluded to in the previous section, by and large the attention paid to English(es) has been one which “is largely descriptive, assumes a static view of language use, and hardly takes the view that the varieties being described are implicated in the lives of their speakers” (ibid:237). Drawing on the context of the Philippines, he argues:

A critical sociolinguistics assumes that these Englishes are inextricably embedded in the lives of their speakers – in colonially- and class-induced social relations with which inequalities of multilingualism are intertwined – thus these Englishes are not mere linguistic construction but, more importantly, historical and sociocultural construction as well. To put it in another way, the various Philippine Englishes are lived trajectories of individual Filipino speakers (ibid:237-238)

The shifting of focus from the variety (or varieties) in question to the “lived trajectories of individual […] speakers” reflects the intentions of this thesis. ‘Individual’, here, is not an emphasis of the uniquely personal, but rather an acknowledgement of how specific people’s situations are bound up in particular webs of collective conditions and multiple logics, such as caste, class, gender, religion, colonialism. Although ‘Indian English’ was at one time my object of scholarly interest, the present research takes as its realm of enquiry those who are investing in English in India. It asks how students construct ‘good’ English as an object, how this construction is mediated by their own (colonial and intranational) positioning, how it is framed by particular societal understandings of language and language-learning, why they believe it is worth investing in, and how they come to believe that it can be an agent of social mobility.

As is made clear in subsequent chapters, I argue that students’ experiences with English and their construction of the linguistic object are shaped through their own lived trajectories within particular collective conditions (Chapter 5), through their dialectical engagement with discourses
that frame English as a key to social mobility for certain Indians (Chapters 6 and 7), and through their navigation of both the linguistic capital and the associated other forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977a) that make up the ‘package’ of English speakerhood (Chapter 8). To do so requires drawing on theoretical tools that allow for an exploration of the situatedness of language practice, of the ideological and indexical signalling of their practices, and of the historical and political economic constraints and affordances on such practice. Ultimately, this requires a shift in focus from the language itself to the embodied speaker and the complex conditions in which they find themselves. Thus, if we are to advance with a focus on speakers and conditions, it is important to flesh out the contours of social stratification that are embedded within tensions over English in modern India.

2.3 Social Stratification in India

In this overview of social stratification in India, I do not seek to delineate or reify discrete categories or variables, but rather to shed light on the dynamics and processes of hierarchy, stigmatisation, and struggle that my informants encounter, negotiate and engage in. I attempt to demonstrate how systems of social differentiation function to legitimise and thus reproduce inequality, and how the students, as well- or as ill-equipped as they might be, try to navigate them. To do so requires tracing the historicity of these social positionings, asking how these notions of class or caste have shifted over time, and documenting how they become more or less salient in certain discourses. I therefore begin by fleshing out the ways in which caste has been theorised before discussing its interanimation with class. I then provide an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of class that guide this research, with a particular emphasis on middle-classness as this concerns more directly the students I engaged with. Finally, I look at the strategies that individuals invest in for their own social mobility into middle-classness, and how language – here, English – is “a central site for the production of social differences” (Duchêne 2020:93).
2.3.1 Caste theory

In its most widely understood sense, caste is often described as “a social group placed in a hierarchical order derived from certain Hindu cultural prescriptions” (Mohanty 2004:33). The overarching model commonly referred to sees Hindus divided into four hierarchised varnas: Brahmins (priests, ‘elites’); Kshatriyas (warriors); Vaishyas (merchants); and Shudras (service). Each varna comprises various jatis, or sub-groups, all of which have their “own name, traditional occupation, rank, and distinctive subculture” (Cheema 2011:51) (but see Srinivas (1978 [1962]) for the complexity of distinguishing jati and varna). While wary of Quigley’s warning that generalised, descriptive accounts are “at best inadequate, at worst wholly misleading” (1993:2), as a general rule, the so-called higher castes benefit from higher social prestige and economic assets. Below the four varnas are the previously named ‘untouchables’, known today as Dalits and, in government appellations, as Scheduled Castes.

In practice, the concept of caste is intensely complex. Caste was one of the most polemical topics debated pre- and post-independence, the opposing sides of which can be summarised through two of the most famous figures in modern Indian history: Dr B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit lawyer and writer of the Constitution of the newly independent India, and Mahatma (Mohandas) Gandhi. Ambedkar vehemently opposed caste, arguing that there could be no caste system without casteism and, having witnessed first-hand the atrocities inflicted on Dalits due to their ‘untouchable’ status, he was justifiably scathing in his attacks on the system:

There cannot be a more degrading system of social organization than the Chaturvarnya [four-fold caste system]. It is the system which deadens, paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity. This is no exaggeration. History bears ample evidence. (Ambedkar 1944:part 17).

Gandhi, on the other hand, while he rejected casteism, was a supporter of the system, believing it to be an “eternal principle”, and that any caste-assigned job – be it priest or street sweeper – was a divine act, and to be viewed as equal. As Dirks explains, for Gandhi, the principles on which caste were based were noble (2002:268); it was a question of removing the social hierarchy that had
developed within the system (although he later moved to the opinion that “caste must go” and advocated for inter-caste marriage (cited in Deshpande, 2013:34)). For Ambedkar, the hierarchy could not be removed without an entire upheaval of the system. It was not enough to remove the stigma associated with being an untouchable – what was needed was a rejection of the Hindu scriptures (Deshpande 2013), and an entire reorganisation and redistribution of the social structure, one that took into account both social and economic dimensions. Thus, the definition of caste, and the role it plays in Indian society, have been fiercely debated by Indians, politicians and scholars of India, for many years.

Furthermore, the ways in which caste has been studied and documented have had lasting impacts on how caste is predominantly viewed today. In the colonial period, much as we have seen with the example of the Linguistic Survey of India, caste became “a central object of investigation” and, with the implementation of the first census by the British, became “the primary subject of social classification and knowledge” (Dirks 2002:15). As such, “the very effort to enumerate caste led to important changes, with the institution becoming progressively more and more ‘substantialised’ and fixed than it had been previously” (Deshpande 2013:34). Scholars such as Dirks have argued that, while caste certainly existed in pre-colonial India, technologies of colonial governmentality such as the census “made caste what it is today […] by making caste the central symbol of Indian society” (Dirks 2002:5). This legacy of colonialism and its “mapping [of] technical training onto existing social hierarchies”, i.e., by allocating certain work to caste groups based on their apparent natural or inherent skills, has equally had lasting effects on the caste make-up of India’s most prestigious engineering institutes (IITs) and has thus contributed to the “postcolonial stratification of engineering colleges” today (Subramanian 2015:216). While some state that the framing of caste as a colonial construct is unconvincing or unhelpful (see Deliège 1994, Gupta 2004), it is hard to ignore that, at the very least, under colonisation, caste was subjected to technologies of classification which solidified boundaries of difference not only between caste groups but also between the colonisers and the colonised. Drawing on Said’s work on Orientalism, McGuire argues that “the colonial project depends on the continual production of an essential difference between colonizer and
colonized” (2011:124) in order to justify its rule. In other words, the classification of and interest in caste and in Indian bodies by the British “was always, simultaneously, a project of difference-making that worked to support a notion of Indians and India itself as fundamentally different from the people and civilizations of Europe” (ibid). To frame India’s ‘essence’ as one that is “dominated by caste hierarchy” thus “fulfils the need for a single and powerful organizing image” (Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma 1994:2, see also Appadurai 1988). The argument here is not that caste did not exist before colonialism, but rather that it came to be, through colonial technologies of governance and later through structural accounts of the caste system (e.g., Dumont 1980), portrayed as the defining ‘essence’ of India, as an “all-encompassing institution whose ideology of hierarchy pervaded every aspect of social life” (Delèze 2011:46). Such essential framings thus paint Indians as “stagnant and passive”, as existing in “as a world devoid of social change, economic development, equality, compassion, and communal solidarity” (ibid).

Western anthropological work in the postcolonial period reinforced, as Mitra argues, this “view of caste as a unique and enduring institution” (Mitra, 1994:51; Delèze 2011). Arguably one of the most influential Western scholars of the caste system, Dumont (1980) provided a structuralist Brahmin-centric conceptualization based on hierarchical purity – a conceptualisation which has had widespread influence, and indeed is the one with which I opened this section – with the ‘purest’, the Brahmins, at the top and the Dalits occupying a place beneath the system entirely (hence their ‘untouchable’ status). In the years since, his theories have been criticised for crystallising as a hegemonic scholarly narrative the conceptual understandings of one particular social group – the Brahmins. Srinivas (1959, 1987), for example, preferred the term ‘dominant caste’ which accounted for caste groups who yielded various forms of local power – such as “their numerical or material socioeconomic strength” – regardless of their “ritual purity” (Vaid 2014:394). Many have made the case that the so-called “lower castes” have never ideologically accepted their ‘inferior’ status or claims of their lesser ‘purity’, nor do they willingly submit to the ‘higher’ castes (indeed, the submission has often been more of an economic necessity: see Sharma 1994, Gupta 2004). There is thus no “single ideology behind the practice of caste throughout the subcontinent” (Cort
and terms such as ‘high’ and ‘low’ are deeply contested and problematic. As such, multiple scholars have argued for alternative conceptualisations of the caste system that move away from an organisation of hierarchical purity accepted by all to the notion of competing, differentialised identity groups (Sahay 2004) with varying levels of power, with further conceptualisations insisting on the manner in which caste also finds particular salience as a political category or tool for political power or advancement (Mitra 1994; Vaid 2014). As Gupta argues, we must “abandon the view that a single all-encompassing hierarchy is the most enduring diacritic of caste” (2004:vii). This does not mean that hierarchical practices related to caste are obsolete – indeed, as I demonstrate, caste stigma is a salient component of the life experiences of the students in this study, and forms part of the reason why they desire English. Rather, it forces us to “ask if caste can be seen first in terms of discrete identities, and then see its implications in terms of the articulation of multiple and contesting hierarchies” (ibid). The notion of competing, differentialised identity groups is thus a useful framing only insofar as it also takes into account how ‘differentialisation’ often forms the justification for inequality, in which certain caste groups are not only essentialised but are also stigmatised by groups that wield more cultural, social (and often economic) capital as they vie for position on a terrain of material and ideological struggle which is in constant flux as caste adapts and adopts new forms in changing political-economic circumstances. As Deliège has argued:

Castes, in other words, have radically changed, and more importantly, as we will see, they have undergone a process of “substantialization” by which they are more and more becoming rival ethnic blocs pitted against each other in the fight to obtain access to scarce resources (2011:49)

A focus on caste as identity groups allows for explorations of caste pride that are not compatible with theories such as that of Dumont (given the implication in his conceptualisation that ‘lower’ castes accept their ritual ‘inferiority’). With specific reference to, among others, the caste group who formed the bulk of the students who participated in this research, Gupta writes:
To call them ‘low caste’ or ‘middle caste’ can be very misleading and takes our attention away from the fact that they do not see themselves as inferior in any essential sense. Perhaps they are poorer, they may be less powerful, less literate, but not essentially made of substances that are inferior, let alone polluting (2004:XIII)

However, as I argue in later chapters, while the pride that many of my students demonstrated in their caste was palpable – there were several examples of students refuting their inferiorisation – they were simultaneously aware that they continued to be stigmatised as unintelligent, thuggish and uncouth by other caste groups, and at times they too engaged in symbolic violence that derided, for example, their caste’s ways of speaking (Chapter 8). For many of these young students, it was this knowledge of how they were perceived – regardless of the extent to which they disputed those perceptions – which had seen them turn towards English as a way to ‘prove themselves’ and attempt to redress injustice (Chapter 6). Thus, while the ‘identity’ conceptualisation of caste is useful as it moves us away from a homogenous ideology of caste, it is important not to let interrogations of power dynamics fall by the wayside. Further, as Mosse has argued, the reframing of caste as “competing ethnic-like or cultural identities” overlooks how caste remains a fundamental organising component of the economy (2020:1228). Indeed, for Mosse, he is less interested in what caste may or may not be. Rather, he argues:

Modern caste is not one thing, but neither is it anything. It is a clustered set of social phenomena and effects, recognized and spoken of as ‘caste’, brought to attention or concealed. My focus is on when and in what form caste is made visible or invisible (2020:1227)

As mentioned, caste clearly plays a key role in the decisions made by these students to invest in English education. Yet, as I argue in Chapter 7, the slippages between class and caste framings are evident of caste erasure within discourses of social mobility and economic advancement. As such, in this study I do not seek to provide a ‘definition’ of caste, but rather, to provide an account of the moments and manners in which caste is made salient – or erased – for my informants, to trace how such framings have come to be possible, and the effects of such framings. To do so requires understanding
how the political-economic history of India has shaped discourses and practices of caste, and its interrelation with class.

2.3.2 Caste in flux
Contrary to colonial constructions of India and the caste system “in terms of fixed, immutable essences” (Mitra 1994:70), caste has been repeatedly shaped and reshaped. As several scholars have observed, the more overt practices have somewhat loosened since independence. Economic opportunities ushered in since the New Economic Laws of the 1990s have offered alternative (and potentially more lucrative) career paths to some members of lower and middle-ranking castes, inter-caste dining rituals (e.g., separation) are less common, and inter-caste marriage, while still far from being the norm, has led, particularly in urban areas, to a slight diminishing of the importance of caste. With regard to the latter point, however, while ‘caste no bar’ may appear with relatively more frequency in matrimonial advertisements, other forms of capital which index caste – and indeed which overlap with class – are still commonly found, such as English fluency, higher education, vegetarianism, a respectable job, or the less-than-subtle ‘good family background’. Further, inter-caste marriages are much more likely to take place between caste groups with similar levels of symbolic, economic and cultural capital: Brahmin-Dalit marriages are exceptionally rare and when they do occur, are often ‘love marriages’ that take place without the consent of the family (and have often led to tragic consequences). Thus, as, Mohanty reminds us:

Social and religious movements to reform this order did contribute to weakening the oppressive character of the caste system, but they failed to abolish it... [Measures implemented by the government] have no doubt made some dent but the institution is far from gone. (Mohanty 2004:33)

The measures Mohanty refers to are numerous. The practice of untouchability was officially banned in 1955\(^2\) in an attempt to move independent India towards modernity – which the concept of caste was deemed unsuitable for – and caste affiliation was removed from the census after 1931, although, for the

\(^2\) The Untouchability (Offences) Act: Act No.22
first time since then, a separate caste census in 2011 was conducted after the official census in an attempt to gain an accurate count of the ‘Other Backward Classes’ (it is still unclear whether this will form part of the 2021 census, despite pressure from caste activists to include it). One would, however, be naïve to assume that the removal of caste from the census was an indication of the disappearance of caste. Rather, for Deshpande, these state policies represent “caste-blindness”, which leads the privileged castes “to think of themselves as ‘casteless’” (2013:32). He writes:

Having encashed its traditional caste-capital and converted it into modern forms of capital like property, higher educational credentials and strongholds in lucrative professions, this section believes itself to be "caste-less" today (ibid).

This “caste-blindness” results in a hyper-visibility for the so-called lower castes, and invisibility for the so-called upper castes, as the dominance of upper castes in positions of power “appears to be a story about something other than caste, like the story of nation-building for example, or the story of a great and ancient tradition modernising itself” (ibid:33, emphasis in the original). Deshpande thus calls for a re-examination of what he terms “the ‘naturalisation’ of the upper castes as the legitimate inheritors of modernity” (ibid). This stems in part from the constitutional and legal framing of caste through reservation/quota systems, through which “caste was henceforth to be recognised only as a source of disadvantage or vulnerability, not as a source of privilege or advantage” (ibid:37). Since independence, on various occasions, special reservations and quotas for government jobs and university places have been put in place (and subsequently increased) for what are referred to officially as ‘Scheduled Castes’ and ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (SC and ST) – i.e. the Dalits or untouchable castes – as well as certain quotas for ‘Other Backwards Classes’ (castes who were not ‘untouchable’ but have also been historically disadvantaged – the ‘lower’ castes), in order to address the social and economic imbalance via governmental actions of positive discrimination. While these quotas have certainly allowed for the social mobility of many individuals, by allocating a political status to different caste groups, the caste of those in the ST, SC and OBC categories becomes “so indelibly engraved that
it overwrites all other identities”, while those in the General Category (i.e., those caste groups deemed to not require access to quotas) come to represent “the unmarked universal citizen” whose caste identities are “incidental or irrelevant” (ibid:39). For Deshpande, this process is akin to how “patriarchal common sense reduces gender to women, while white supremacy limits race to non-whites or ‘people of colour’” (ibid:38). As Subramanian has argued, in the postcolonial present, “nonelites have caste while elites have class and other more ‘cosmopolitan’ affiliations” (2015:296). Caste is a lower-caste problem; the upper-castes are free to define themselves beyond their caste.

Of course, as various tragic events in recent history have shown, caste does impinge most violently on the lives of the most oppressed groups, the *dalits*. Discussing the fate of said groups, Mohanty states: “The fact is that they still remain economically underdeveloped, politically powerless and socially oppressed by the upper castes” (2004:37). For the OBCs – the category to which the majority of my informants belong – while incidences of outright violence may be less frequent than those committed against *Dalits*, caste nevertheless plays a salient role in how they move through the world, as I demonstrate in Chapter 6.

While various quotas are in place in order to encourage affirmative action, there are layers of complexity within these categories, and it is worth unpacking to whom these reservations apply. In the governmental appellations for marginalised and oppressed groups, there is frequent slippage between notions of caste and class. The term ‘caste’ is used when referring to Scheduled Castes, but this changes to ‘class’ when referring to Other Backward Classes (OBC). However, individuals qualify for the status of OBC according to their caste or community (Government of India: n.d.). In order for a *caste* to qualify, they must meet various social, economic and educational criteria. There is, however, an additional economic criterion for *individuals* of an eligible caste dependent on income. Offspring of OBC reservation-eligible parents who earn above Rs 6 lakh yearly (approximately 6000 GBP), and therefore belong to the government-termed ‘Creamy Layer’ “would not be entitled to get the benefit of reservations available to Other Backward Classes” (Government of India: n.d.). What we see here is both a

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3 While caste is traditionally a Hindu construct, the government also lists various non-Hindu castes/communities. See Santhosh 2015 for Muslim castes.
conflation of caste and class through the choice of terms used for reservation purposes, but also, paradoxically, a clear demonstration of how caste and socio-economic status are not synonymous, in that, as the government term ‘Creamy Layer’ renders evident, one can be from a less privileged caste, but a higher economic ‘class’ in terms of wealth.

2.3.3 Caste and class

As the government’s notion of ‘Creamy Layer’ indicates, not all members of one caste can be grouped similarly in terms of economic position. While there has always been a certain level of internal differentiation, this has arguably sharpened since the liberalisation of the economy in 1991, although, as Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase (2009) argue, the embourgeoisement of the middle classes has been overplayed by the media and many are yet to reap the benefits. Such internal differentiation is one of the factors that sparked protests following the attempts to implement the recommendations of the Mangal Commission Report in the 1990s, and the Patidar riots in Gujarat led by the activist (now Congress politician) Hardik Patel in 2015 which called for the Patidar/Patels to be allocated OBC status. Considered to be a relatively privileged caste, no reservations are in place for the Patidar/Patels – a landowning caste – despite some living on meagre incomes. Patel’s actions call attention to the fact that caste and class are, for some, very different things: one can be from a socially privileged caste and be lacking in economic capital, and vice versa.

The problem here, however, is that in this sense, class takes on a purely economic standing, as if class was confined only to assets and wealth, and caste to social standing and status. The reality is far more complex. Caste and class are not synonymous, nor are they easily distinguished; they interact with each other in various ways depending on the area, context and community. As Sharma writes:

[L]et us state that caste and class are not polar opposites; caste and class are found in both rural and urban areas; caste is not simply confined to ritual ranking and class is not just a grouping of people based on common economic and occupational interests; both caste and class are corporate as well as individualistic entities; and the two have fixity as well as flexibility. Caste is not
being replaced by class, and caste is still changing, rapidly finding a place for itself in non-conventional secular domains of social, political and economic life. (Sharma 1998:5).

The two concepts – described by Ambedkar as “next door neighbours” (1944:para.31) – are different, but, as Mohanty contends, they cannot be separated: “understanding poverty is incomplete without seeing the interface of caste, class and gender” (2004:20). One must also be careful, however, to avoid generalisations: class and caste in India are not enmeshed “in a formulaic manner” (Fernandes 2006:xxxiii). As would be expected, for the most marginalised groups, caste and class do often merge together in a multi-pronged oppression, meaning that ‘lower-caste’, below-poverty-line women are in the most vulnerable and abused positions (Deshpande 2011). In certain areas of India caste divisions and tensions are particularly strong, but, as Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase explain in their study of the middle classes in West Bengal, “unlike in other parts of India, where people do not hesitate to discuss caste position, the Bengali bhadralok4 do not generally broach this topic in polite company”(Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009:24). For the participants in their research, caste takes a back seat: “the displays of social distance were framed in terms of class rather than caste” (ibid:25). This latter example, however, may be more indicative of Deshpande’s (2013) ideological ‘castelessness’, or an attempt to pivot oneself discursively towards modernity, rather than an actual reflection of a reduction in caste-based practice. Nevertheless, what these conflicting ideological positionings point to is the importance of addressing caste and class in a way that that examines both the local context and their “interanimation”. For Christian Chun, the concept of interanimation builds on Crenshaw’s “intersectionality” (1989, 2009) in a way that allows for a more dynamic understanding of the elements involved, thus pushing us:

to conceptualize the dynamics of class identifications interanimating with gender, sexuality, and race playing out in multiple domains and scales through constant processes in motion being shaped by a number of forces, be

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4 A Bengali word meaning “gentlefolk”, a term that dates back to colonial times. While the community is mostly comprised of upper-castes, there is internal caste heterogeneity.
As such, this study seeks to identify how, why and when caste is made salient, or (in)visible, for the students in the NGO, and how it co-articulates or contrasts with how they understand their ‘class-ness’, and their possibilities for social mobility. Having explored how caste plays out in Modern India, we turn now to a theorisation and examination of class.

2.3.4 Theorising class

While caste is a fundamental shaping factor in the life experiences of my participants, one cannot leave the discussion here. Since independence, notions of class have emerged in prominent ways and, as we see in Chapters 7 and 8, class forms an important part of how students understand their oppression (that is, in terms of class discrimination, poverty and lack of resources), as well as being a fundamental factor in the NGO’s vision (that is, an explicit emphasis on providing routes to white-collar employment, and an implicit emphasis on developing middle-class subjectivities within the students through ‘personality development’). However, as Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma remark, while class studies in the West have tended to focus on class ‘cultures’, in the Indian context, “class seems to have been treated as a culturally ‘empty’ category” (1994:18), with ‘culture’ often relegated to the realm of caste. This posits a reductive opposition: “as if caste had no economy and class no culture” (Mitra, 1994:52). In the years since, there has been a great deal of attention paid to class in India, particularly given the economic and social changes that resulted from the policy shifts of the early 1990s, but a large number of these studies have relied solely on socio-economic variables to define ostensibly coherent groups (Fernandes 2006). In what follows, I will firstly elaborate on the theories I draw on to understand the concept of class. I then sketch an outline of what it means to perform, embody and negotiate middle-classness in India today, focusing especially on the concept of strategy in the quest for middle class status, before demonstrating how English comes to play a crucial role in this process.

This study takes as a point of reference the conceptualisations of class in the work of Pierre Bourdieu which sought to move away from classical
Marxist understandings of class that were based fundamentally on the relations of production, and which seek instead to incorporate an understanding of a wider range of elements that contribute to how we are socialised into, understand, and feel our own class positions, and the mechanisms that allow for class distinction and stigma. Indeed, it is in Bourdieu’s social theory that Block (2014) finds a fruitful understanding of social class that incorporates elements beyond the purely economic, one which is “conceptualised not only in terms of traditional indexes of income, occupation and education, but also in terms of status and a range of social practices” (ibid:50). Economic capital is indeed important, but symbolic capital plays out in a similar – and often equally important – way. Bourdieu’s account of the apportionment of certain sports to certain classes in French society succinctly illustrates this argument:

Thus it can be seen that economic barriers – however great they may be in the case of golf, skiing, sailing or even riding and tennis – are not sufficient to explain the class distribution of these activities. There are more hidden entry requirements, such as family tradition and early training, or obligatory manner (of dress and behaviour), and socializing techniques, which keep these sports closed to the working class. (2010:214)

Therefore, any conceptualisation of social class must take into account not only the traditional economic factors such as income, property and assets, but also the social aspects of class, embodied in class dispositions, strategies of distinction, practices of consumption and the habitus of individuals, and objectified in symbolic capital. In this way, capital for Bourdieu is used both in the literal economic sense – wealth, assets, land – and also in a metaphorical sense – in one’s education (cultural capital) or networks (social capital), or in one’s apparent savoir-faire of particular spaces, that demarcate which spaces are appropriate for certain people. Bourdieu’s focus on the embodiment of dispositions – through his theory of the habitus – is particularly relevant for this study, as it draws attention to both the ways in which one becomes socialised in relatively durable ways into one’s class, but equally to the way in which class is a fundamentally embodied practice. The practice element of class thus highlights how class mobility often becomes a negotiation, a form of strategising as one seeks to acquire not only wealth but also, and crucially,
the tastes, movements, value-systems, style, and speech of those who have garnered symbolic capital through processes of distinction and technologies of class reproduction such as education.

Thus, this study considers class not as “a social category or empirical condition” but rather “a cultural project or practice” (Liechty 2003:21) and, following Donner and De Neve, seeks to emphasise the “everyday practices and idioms through which middle-classness is constructed and expressed” (2011:11). Middle-classness is “not a state but a process; it must be performed, narrated and put on display in order to become” (Brosius 2010:263; Liechty 2003) and is thus always “in the making” (Donner and Deneve 2011:13). Importantly, as Fernandes has highlighted:

Such practices are not merely individualized or subjective forms of behavior that rest solely on the contingency of daily life; rather, they are the outcome of a dynamic set of processes that are both symbolic and material, and that are shaped both by longer historical processes as well as by the temporality of the everyday (2006:xxviii-xxx)

Class practices thus have histories that imbue them with social weight, and which are reproduced, contested, and re-worked in everyday practice with varying levels of success. When theorised as an on-going project our attention is also called to the potential risks of such a pursuit, that imbues these performed identities with deep layers of tension: “Minor misdemeanours – mistakes in performance, articulation or presentation – can have lasting effects on the individual concerned and damage a family’s reputation” (Donner and De Neve 2011:13). These risks, furthermore, can be seen “especially clearly where relative newcomers to this particular status game are concerned” (ibid). Brosius points to the potential for embarrassment in the pursuit of middle-classness in her discussion of the ‘old’ Delhi elites, who:

would play out class distinctions by referring to themselves as leading the ‘modest’ but authentic Indian lifestyle of a ‘cultured person’ while ‘newcomers’ would be classified as embarrassingly overambitious, clumsy and vulgar (Brosius 2010:21)
For Brosius, this is an indication of strategies of distinction by the ‘established’ middle classes, anxious to draw boundaries between their own practices and those of the aspiring middle classes – those “parvenus” who “fall behind in good taste and etiquette” (2010:304). Middle-classness, then, is not only dynamic, but contested and internally fractured (Fernandes 2006). To acquire middle-class status requires from individuals not only economic support but the acquisition of a new habitus, and thus “the imaginative work and self-discipline essential to cultivating new forms of subjectivity” (Baviskar & Ray 2011:8, drawing on Mahmood 2005), which may or may not be validated as successful or legitimate, and which are subject to evolving regimes of distinction as established and aspiring classes compete. Class, then, is inherently dynamic: “a social relational process in performative motion dynamically shaped by situational contexts” (Chun 2019:1). As Blommaert and Makoe argue, as a consequence of this shift in conceptualisation of class – from a theorisation rooted and defined in the organisation of economic production to a focus on behaviour and practice – class “can become an ethnographic object” (2012:117) in which a focus on the “small things” can help us identify the larger, structural constraints as they are acted out “in the fine grain of ordinary life” (Rampton 2010:4). As such, this study takes as a point of interest a focus on how the students’ investment in English and its associated non-linguistic forms of cultural capital (see Chapter 8) is part of a wider project of struggle for individual class mobility and the pursuit of middle-classness through personality development training. While some students in the NGO occasionally referred to themselves as ‘middle-middle’ or ‘not very poor, not rich’, their entrance into the middle classes was certainly not assured – and was further complicated by their caste – hence their enrolment in the NGO. I have thus come to understand the majority of these students as belonging to the emerging middle classes, that is “those who fall outside of the ‘idea of the middle class’ but who increasingly claim ownership over the term” (Ray 2019:217). It is important here, then, to interrogate precisely how ‘middle-class’ is understood in India.
2.3.5 Indian middle class-ness

As mentioned above, the attention paid to the Indian middle classes has intensified since the economic policies of the early 90s which, it is argued, led to prosperity and the formation of a new middle class (I return to a further discussion of the effects of these policies in Chapter 3). However, many err on the side of caution with regard to the effects of liberalisation on the middle-classes. Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase take exception to a narrative that claims liberalisation resulted “in a massively expanded, homogenous mass of wealthy, Indian middle classes who have been the principal beneficiaries of liberalization, profiting immensely from the new opportunities for education, jobs and consumption” calling these “celebratory, media-hyped views” (2009:2). Fernandes, too, rejects the assumption that “the middle class is a self-evident beneficiary or proponent of economic liberalization” (2006:XVII) as such assumptions gloss over the vast internal differentiation of the heterogeneous middle classes, many of whom are yet to reap the benefits, “principally because their aspirations are not matched by material gain” (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009:177). What many do agree on, however, is the extent to which liberalisation brought into play not only shifts in economic policies but also “set into motion a broader shift in national political culture” and sparked “changing trends in consumption practices, lifestyles, and aspirations” (Fernandes 2006:29) which shaped notions of new middle-classness. Importantly, middle-classness is not, as many have argued, simply a question of consumption patterns, but rather a collection of “diverse cultural practices, values and identities” (Donner and De Neve 2011; Fernandes 2006, 2015). For Fernandes, ‘easy’ narratives of consumerism or attempts to measure population groups are not sufficient in an exploration of India’s middle classes (see also Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009). Rather, she argues, a more dynamic approach is needed in order to map what she terms “a productive and messy ambiguity that shapes the boundaries of this group”, an ambiguity that stems from “the promise of access and aspiration for new entrants even as it is mired in a politics of inequality and exclusion” (2006:240; 2015). In other words, a key element of the construction of the Indian middle class is a belief that it is potentially open to all.
Yet, as we have established, access to the middle classes is not a simple pursuit: it “is not merely a question of money but of linguistic and aesthetic knowledge and respectability” (Fernandes 2006:33). In line with Bourdieu’s (1977a) habitus, this extends equally to embodied practices, to the use, for example, of the body while navigating certain spaces: a visible unease with an escalator in a shopping mall is not only an indication of a lack of familiarity with this equipment, but rather “marks one’s body as incongruous with the very spaces and practices that define the new middle class” (McGuire 2011:132). In line with this framing, in Chapter 8, I seek to map out the wide-ranging practices of middle-classness that are both embedded within and adjacent to speaking English, and without which, linguistic capital loses much of its bargaining power in the struggle for social mobility.

A consequence of the understanding of class as practice is that it forces us to look at how those who aspire to the middle classes engage in strategies of upward mobility through the “acquisition of particular kinds of social and cultural capital (including particular kinds of credentials, skills, lifestyle distinctions, and aesthetic/cultural knowledge)” (Fernandes 2006:91). Aspirational youth invest in a wide range of commodities and practices as a strategy for mobility. For many, this means investing their time and money in various forms of cultural capital, a key element of which in India is educational credentials. For many more, the expense of MBA programmes remains entirely inaccessible, and so many turn instead to the plethora of training institutes that have emerged since liberalisation. Among these is a particular type of training institute that seeks to offer ‘personality development’, sometimes in tandem with the acquisition of other skills. What is particularly interesting about the emergence of such training courses is how they call explicit attention to Bourdieu’s hidden requirements of the middle classes. It is not enough for young Indians to have education credentials but equally, as noted in the previous sections, they require the savoir-faire, or symbolic capital required “to conform to the cultural standard of the new liberalizing middle class” (Fernandes 2006:96). As Chapters 7 and 8 demonstrate, this ‘personality development’ encompasses a wide range of practices, from style and taste to manners and bodily movement (see also McGuire 2013). As such, enrolling in these programmes becomes a way for aspiring middle class individuals, or those for whom their ‘middle-classness’
is unassured, to strategise, and “to negotiate the uncertainties of a restructured labor market” (Fernandes 2006:98), although they do not necessarily lead to upward mobility (ibid). This uncertainty thus leads one to continually invest, repeatedly strategise, which highlights “the disjunctions that exist between idealized discursive representations of the new middle class and the socioeconomic uncertainties of employment patterns” (Fernandes 2006:118). Importantly, Fernandes notes, the volatility, competition and insecurity of the labour market has not sparked opposition to it; rather, it has led to widespread “individualized strategies of upward mobility” (2006:118). Future success, to many young Indians, thus appears dependent on their own individual pursuit.

2.3.6 Strategising through English

English, as one may suspect, is perceived as a crucial component of strategising for upward mobility. As mentioned, during the British Raj, English education became “a primary means for entry to the colonial middle class” (Fernandes 2006:206) and thus it both created and maintained “an externally imposed hegemony while facilitating the perpetuation of a caste and class-based domination by the indigenous elite” (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 2009:131). English education continued as a stronghold of a select few in India until the restructuring of the economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, upon which there became a widespread demand for access to the language. Access to and acquisition of English remains today embedded in the formation of class boundaries. It is “a form of cultural capital” and “a structural marker of middle class identity”, in that it provides distinction to its speakers and also “locates the individual within the new middle class in socioeconomic terms as such linguistic skills are a necessary component for access to the new economy and skilled jobs” (Fernandes 2006:69). Importantly, Fernandes argues, the imbrication of class and language in India works not only to mark the boundaries of – and constitute – the middle class, but also creates differentiation within elite groups between the English-speaking and vernacular elites whose boundaries are constructed through very different cultural capital and based within very different fields. The embrace of English as a middle-class pursuit demonstrates a “relationship to an outside, an external world that is represented alternatively in varying contexts as Westernized, Western, or global” (ibid). Command of English is the hallmark
of a particular middle class-ness, pivoted towards globalisation, which, by virtue of this perceived outward outlook, is thus placed “in a role of national leadership; that is, it is seen as the social group that can steer the Indian nation through the shifting terrains of globalization” (ibid:70).

Given this combination of the cultural capital of English, its ostensible provision of jobs, and the ways in which the prosperous future of India in a globalised world comes to be seen as laying in its hands, it is of little surprise that both the supply of and demand for English education and training centres has boomed over the last few decades. As Sancho writes, the quest for English among non-urban middle-classes – those who have benefited financially from agricultural reforms – has intensified recently as they attempt to “establish cultural distinction and to shore up their recently acquired economic position” (2017:520, see also Jeffery et al. 2011). The association of English and a particular middle-classness is so potent that the inability to command the language comes to be perceived as the only obstacle preventing people from social mobility: “the reason for their social backwardness” (Roy 2015:525). To not speak English is lived by many as a sense of personal failure, which stems in part from the narratives of individual responsibility and strategising that has come to define the middle classes. For those unable to access English or master certain prestigious forms, this affective impact is deeply felt. As I demonstrate in Chapter 6, while investment in English is certainly embedded in middle class pursuits, such a pursuit is often not only calculated in terms of potential calculable gains but equally in affective returns, that is, as a way to ‘put right’ or counterbalance what Roy has referred to as “the enormous sense of inadequacy and disadvantage” (2015:526) felt by many who have been denied access to the language. These affective relationships with English, I argue, are linked not only to the sense of economic or professional failure that is perceived to be a result of not speaking English, but to what else speaking English is perceived to do for them, what it indexes about them: “one’s ability in English becomes a marker for a whole package of competencies that are difficult to acquire by pedagogic strategy alone” (Nisbett 2013:187). In Chapter 8, I use the term English speakerhood to refer to this “package” of associated cultural capital alongside English that is offered by the NGO, that is, the development of a particular personhood that is part of the performance of
middle classness but also rooted in caste stratification and colonial technologies.

Yet, while new centres offering English, skills and personality training open their doors at an increasing pace, many express doubt over the utility of such programmes: “it is doubtful that a short (and possibly quite poorly taught) course in English or communication skills can do little other than add a new certificate to a candidate’s already burgeoning portfolio of qualifications” (Nisbett 2013:188). In the following chapter I address in more detail the “speculative capital” (Duchêne & Daveluy 2015; Tabiola and Lorente 2017) of investment in English, but it is nonetheless important to point out here that part of the reason why these short courses pursued by many vernacular-medium educated Indians often fail to provide them with what they have hoped for is due to what counts as legitimate English in middle-class circles. As access to the language has increased over the last few decades, so too have practices of distinction among the more established middle and upper classes for whom knowledge of English alone is not sufficient to make claims to middle class status – it must also be the right sort of English (LaDousa 2014). In most cases, this means an English that indexes a (private) English-medium education. As such, one witnesses stratification within English speakers themselves. Instead of providing opportunities for social mobility on an equal footing – which, as we will see in Chapter 6, is a discourse in which many young disenfranchised Indians invest – the result is the polar opposite, as “hierarchies have only hardened between students who come from English-medium backgrounds and those who have learnt English as a second language” (Roy 2015:523). Far from opening up the middle-classes to all, access to English(es) continues to demarcate the boundaries of differentiated social groups.

2.3.7 The Indian middle classes – reworking old hierarchies
In light of the above argument, it might appear that the prominent issue of social stratification leans more today on issues of class than on ostensibly ‘former’ hierarchies such as caste. Indeed, as I explore in Chapter 7, the erasure of caste within narratives of social mobility is one that has come to be emblematic of a middle-class (neoliberal) subjectivity. Contrary to this narrative, I wish to maintain that caste continues to shape the trajectories of
many Indians, and for many of those who aspire to the middle classes, their strategising is often hampered, directly or indirectly, because of caste (or indeed, religion). As Fernandes argues,

[T]he ability of individuals and social segments to accumulate capital and maintain or gain access to new middle class membership are both shaped and constrained by their interaction with layered structures of inequality that have long historical legacies. Such strategies of conversion are shaped by the reworking of long-standing social inequalities such as the symbolic and material structures of caste, religion, language, and gender (2006:221-2)

To navigate the new economy, Fernandes continues, those who aspire to the middle classes must draw on and obtain capital “from both older sources (such as caste and kinship networks) and new arenas (skills/credentials and aesthetic knowledge)” (ibid:136). Research on the private sector (Jodhka 2015) has shed light on the over-representation of ‘upper’ caste Hindus, thus demonstrating that education as a strategy of upward mobility often does not offer returns for those from stigmatised castes or religions. Rather, old hierarchies have led to stratifying layers within the middle classes. As Tierney et al argue, social capital through caste-based kinship networks is crucial not only in gatekeeping, but also in “mobilizing [economic] capital, through banks and otherwise”, which actively disadvantages those from “historically deprived communities” who have no access to collateral in the form of property or land (2019:251). But beyond the social (and by extension economic) capital that caste provides, cultural capital too plays a key role, particularly given how the new middle-class identity has been shaped by an upper-caste identity, one that is “left unmarked” (Fernandes 2005:57), and thus which valorises the symbolic capital associated with privileged Hindu caste groups. Fernandes traces this to the formation of the colonial middle classes, in which the new elite represented “a reworking of existing caste-based inequalities” (ibid:7). She provides an example from the colonial Indian Civil Service, access to which required not only English but also a “‘respectable’ socioeconomic position and family history” (ibid), thus demonstrating how “the boundaries of the colonial middle class were contingent on the reworking of social identities of religion and caste” (ibid:8), and thus drew more often from the upper castes. As such, she argues, “this
upper caste character remained one of the defining characteristics of the colonial middle class” (ibid). Indeed, for Subramanian, “constitutional mechanisms” such as the quota system are in fact “part of what allowed for the translation of caste capital into modern capital” (2015:297) by allocating a “casteless” status to those who fell under the ‘general category’, meaning that “new patterns of caste stratification and consolidation have emerged through the very process of democratic transformation” (ibid:317).

Today, still, the ways one dresses, speaks or eats, one’s knowledge or education, without directly calling upon caste, “often rework caste inequalities through nuanced social codes” (Fernandes 2006:73). Thus, one’s access to the economy is not (strictly) granted through one’s caste affiliation per se, but equally through the cultural capital that one has had access to by virtue of being socialised within a historically privileged caste. Thus, while “overt practises of caste rank” may have somewhat reduced, more subtle practices continue to perpetuate caste stratification and discrimination (Mosse 2019:26). Further, for certain castes – the Dalit castes in particular, but as we will see, also (if less viscerally) for those students who I interacted with – their lack of capital is “further compounded by the presence of active ‘prejudice’ that manifests itself in many different ways in their everyday business life” (Tierney et al 2019:251). Such prejudice arises from the stigma attached to many castes – that is, an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman 1986:13) which works most oppressively for the Dalits, but exists too for the caste group to which most of my participants belong. However, unlike a physical medical condition, for example, caste is not necessarily easy to spot from one’s appearance. In situations where one’s caste status has not yet been made explicit, it can therefore be understood, in Goffman’s terms, as a discreditable, rather than discredited stigma. This raises questions of the strategies, as we saw in the previous section, that those with ‘discreditable’ attributes engage in to further conceal their stigma – that is, to either prevent their caste from being revealed or, what is more likely, to temper people’s reactions to their caste status by ‘proving’ that they do not fit the derogatory stereotype (being unintelligent, for example). Seeking out English, in this instance, could be understood as the acquisition of a “disidentifier” which works to “sever doubts” on the “validity of the virtual [identity]” (ibid:60) that is presented through one’s caste, as ‘lower’ caste individuals are not expected
to demonstrate intelligence, educated-ness, or competent English skills. The possibility to conceal one’s caste through the use of disidentifiers is why, as much research shows (Jodhka and Newman 2007; Subramanian 2015), certain questions are often asked to ascertain people’s castes in work, matrimony or educational settings. Disidentifiers, then, may only work so far, as hiring managers, for example, nonetheless seek to extract further information on candidates’ ‘backgrounds’ in order to identify their caste. Echoing Fernandes’ (2006) comments on the colonial Indian Civil Service, in their study of the practices of hiring managers in the private sector, Tierney et al write:

The hiring manager we interviewed admitted to the fact that the response to the question about the family background also gave them an idea about their ‘social origins’. Caste background of the candidates was not difficult to guess, most of them admitted. This knowledge of ‘social background’ of the candidate directly impacted their decisions on hiring. (2019:251)

Thus, one sees a form of stratification within the middle classes, one that is shaped around caste boundaries, as those with resources and historical privilege have been able to carve out more financially lucrative careers in the private sectors. For those who have suffered caste discrimination, their means of access to the middle classes has been primarily through the reservations system that provides a certain quota of state jobs for such individuals. This, as a result, has “has intensified the upper caste characteristics of new middle-class employment in private-sector, white-collar employment” (Fernandes 2006:104). And yet, reflection on how this further contributes to social stratification is hampered through what Upadhya refers to as the “trope of merit” (2011:185), which provides “a narrative of self-justification and legitimization” (ibid:186) and thus denies caste and valorises, to a certain extent, class, as “a form of social differentiation that is open” (ibid). What we have, then, is a class system that is shaped by pre-existing notions of caste hierarchy, discrimination and capital, but which is discursively framed as solely a class issue, thereby erasing caste. In Mosse’s words:

[T]he neo-liberal framing of social transformation separates out caste as a matter of religion/culture or special-interest politics, making it harder to acknowledge caste as a social structure of the modern market economy itself
that works to help some get ahead, and sorely burdens others; as indeed does the way of talking or not talking about caste (2020:1262 emphasis in original)

As I show in Chapter 7, such framings of stratification that shift emphasis onto modernity and the class system and erase caste (or other pre-existing hierarchies) result in conflicting forms of hope and despair among participants as they try to marry up discourses that frame social mobility as achievable through education and English, and their lived experience of stigma. By seeking to understand how middle-classness is imbued with other forms of stratification and stigma, one can move away from a demarcation of boundaries around socio-economic groups and turn our interest instead to “when, where, how and why being middle-class becomes an option, a possibility, desirable or a problem” (Donner and De Neve: 2011:8). In doing so, I argue, it is possible to shed light on the spoken and unspoken power dynamics that students negotiate as they aspire to middle-classness, and thereby to understand better why (and which) students perceive English to be a means of mobility, the strategies that they invest in, the subjectivities – or habitus – that they seek to acquire in the process, and the ways in which these attempts are then often thwarted.

2.4 Conclusion
Outlining key moments throughout the history of modern India in which language has been a source of tension and has contributed to the stratification of society, this chapter has sought to historicise the material and ideological position(s) of English in India today. Through this, I also endeavoured to trace the academic and scholarly history of English as an object of study in India, before detailing the shift in focus that takes the emphasis from language-as-object and turns it instead towards its speakers, their positionings, and ideology. I have argued that a key component in doing so is to take into account not only the various dynamics of social stratification, but also how language becomes a site of tension within these dynamics. In this case, this has involved examining various theorisations of the caste system and its tensions with class, the ways in which caste continues to shape notions of middle-classness, and how discourses of modernity lead to (discursive) caste erasure. While class and caste are concepts which certainly hold a significant
place in the lived trajectories of my participants – albeit in ways that, as we will see, are often messy and unspoken – this does not mean that they were the only elements of social differentiation that were salient in the NGO. On the contrary, as I explore in later chapters, gender, religion and the urban/rural divide also emerged as important and dynamic components of the students’ and teachers’ (un)successful quests for social mobility. Indeed, as we will see, with their multiplicity of positionings, the students are constantly involved in tense negotiations as they navigate middle-classness. We continue, next, with an overview of further theoretical and conceptual tools with which I address this.
Chapter 3 – Discourse, ideology & political economy

3.1 Introduction
The aim of this chapter is to map out further conceptual tools and theoretical debates in which I have anchored my work. In the previous chapter, I introduced and theorised certain concepts that heavily inform this work, viz. colonialism, class (in particular, the role of Bourdieusian capital and habitus), caste and the role of language within. As such, the concepts presented in this chapter – discourse, language ideologies, political economy (with an emphasis on neoliberalism) – should be read in tandem with those explored in Chapter 2. As the reader will notice throughout the data analysis chapters, I draw on these various concepts at particular points in the research – sometimes alone, sometimes in connection with others – as a key objective of this thesis is to demonstrate what I understand to be a multiplicity of logics that work concurrently – sometimes together, sometimes in contradiction – within discourses of English for social mobility in India. That is, I seek to show that each of these concepts are relevant for understanding the participants’ experience, but that none in isolation can provide a full account.

In the first part of the chapter, I lay out the epistemological and ontological underpinnings that guide this research, before elaborating on my understanding of discourse and ideology, with an emphasis on particular concepts within the field of language ideologies that I have found useful for the interpretation of my data. In the final part of the chapter, I address my understanding of political economy, focusing primarily on research that has been undertaken on neoliberalism, given how this is a dominant lens through which language learning has been addressed by scholars throughout the last few decades. This study (Chapter 7 in particular) hopes to contribute to such literature through an exploration of not only how neoliberalism manifests itself in a particular context within a web of co-existing other logics, but also how neoliberal discourses are negotiated on the ground, that is, through a focus on its ‘uptake’ (Urla 2019).
3.2 Epistemological and ontological assumptions

The development of a research project is fundamentally inscribed within the researcher’s particular perspective of the social world. In order to justify the particular research procedure, it is therefore essential to foreground the epistemological and ontological underpinnings that shape this work. While I have chosen to do this within my conceptual framework chapter in order to trace the link between epistemology, ontology and my analytical tools, there are clearly also consequences of these assumptions on my methodology (and, indeed, the development of the research questions themselves).

This research follows a critical sociolinguistic approach (Heller et al 2017), which draws upon a particular constructivist position – what Heller calls poststructural realism – that acknowledges the social construction of reality, but simultaneously acknowledges that “it is constructed on the basis of symbolic and material structural constraints that are empirically observable” (Heller 2008: 251). She continues,

The things we do and the things we believe are influenced by some of the concrete, practical conditions of our lives (how we organize ourselves to eat or get shelter, for example, and what materials we have to work with to do so), and by some of the cultural frames of meaning we have developed to make our way in the world (ibid)

While this research holds that social actors certainly have degrees of agency, I attempt to demonstrate how agency is in various ways constrained, or mediated, by ideological structures within certain political economic configurations that have become more or less solidified through social action over time, and which we continue to reproduce, or contest, through our own interactions and behaviour. Such a positioning to social reality, in turn, informs our epistemological stance, or “how to approach such a social world empirically” (Pérez-Milans 2013:31), in that it pivots us towards what is both “observable in the here and now” as well as “the traces laid down in time and space by those interactions” (Heller 2001a:212) that constrain, or enable, actors. This provides the justification for the methodological choice of critical sociolinguistic ethnography, which is not only a question of method, but,
importantly, is anchored in this specific epistemological and ontological framing.

One consequence of such an approach is that it raises the question of language “as a domain where these social processes are constituted” (Pérez-Milans 2016:85). That is, it shifts the framing of ‘language’ away from traditional linguistic interpretations of language as “natural objects that exist in isolation from the social world to which they refer” (ibid:86) and towards a notion of language as social practice: language is both situated and situating. In other words, in the framing of language as social practice, language cannot be looked at in isolation from “the social processes that it shapes and that shape it” (Heller et al 2017:4). As Heller has argued:

Part of my point is to show that language is not a transparent window into social processes but, rather, a constitutive element of them, both in the ways that it forms part of the social practices that construct social reality, and in the ways it serves as a terrain for working out struggles that are fundamentally about other things (2011:49)

In this sense, language thus plays a dual role in social processes – both of which are relevant for this study: “language is both a key domain of struggle over difference and inequality, and a means of conducting that struggle” (Heller 2001b:120). In other words, language as social practice plays a key role in the discursive (re)production and contestation of social organization and inequality (i.e., Heller’s “means of conducting that struggle”); but language is also the object of struggle. As Duchêne argues:

Language, therefore, is more than a simple object: it is practices but it is also symbolic and material resources. In this way, language conditions particular forms of social stratification, permitting or limiting access to positions of power. Language thus becomes a means of exclusion and social inequality, just as it allows social reproduction (2008:12)

Language and languages are thus deeply embedded in social differentiation, which results in “a social hierarchy of speakers, conferring to some individuals or groups the profit of distinction while depriving others of symbolic and material resources” (Duchêne 2020:93). And the distribution of
prestigious resources – or allocation of prestige to a particular resource – is heavily embedded in struggles that encompass a wide range of categories of social stratification beyond language itself (race, class, gender, religion, and so on). These two elements, however, are not disconnected: control of the discursive space (the means of contesting) hinges in many ways on (control of) the distribution of linguistic and other resources (and, in rather a circular way, such resources are loaded with symbolic value partly through what Heller refers to as the ‘traces’ (2001a:213) of historical, discursive social practice). This second element is crucial if we are to avoid overlooking the material aspects of social stratification and inequality – for example, access to the English language and its prestige forms – which work in tandem with the more discursive and ideological aspects of social action.

As such, it is my conviction that, in order to investigate practices of inequality, social mobility and English in India, it is imperative to keep one eye on the here and now, but simultaneously on the historical and socio-political context which social interactions both create and are created by. Drawing on the work of Cicourel, Heller reminds us of the importance of drawing out the “linkages and trajectories” of social interaction, arguing that interactions “cannot be understood without reference to the histories of that interaction, and to constraints the full dimensions of which may actually be beyond the apprehension of specific actors” (2007:634). In the previous chapter, I attempted to lay the groundwork for this through an overview of the history of English as a research object in India, the salient moments of discursive tension involving English throughout India’s (post)colonial history, and a theorisation of caste, class and their interplay which sits within the epistemological and ontological framings laid out here. What remains is an explanation of the further theoretical and conceptual tools that I have selected to approach my data – tools which are necessarily shaped by my own understanding of social reality and the construction of knowledge. In line with the above argument, there are three key elements that need to be addressed: discourse, ideology and political economy.
3.3 Discourse and ideology

Both ‘ideology’ and ‘discourse’ have multiple meanings, traditions and histories (Eagleton 1991, Määtä 2014, Purvis & Hunt 1993) that stem from their uses across different scholarly fields with differing, and sometimes conflicting, epistemological and ontological stances. In a very broad sense, one can gloss discourse and ideology as both referring to the mediation and organisation of meaning, and the production of what counts as knowledge. It is important, however, given their wide-ranging, conflicting and contested meanings (Woolard 1998), even within academic disciplines, to clarify how I understand and mobilise the terms. Given my own academic socialisation in the study of French at British and French universities and at a Grande École, I am accustomed to approaching these terms from a Foucauldian perspective, which departs from the Marxist interpretation of ideology (see section 3.3.1) and prefers the term discourse. To abandon the term ideology creates a problem, however, given my scholarly engagement with the field of linguistic anthropology and in particular its sub-field of language ideologies. Of course, as I explain below, the field of language ideologies does not subscribe to the Marxist interpretation of ideology that Foucault sought to distance himself from, but this does raise the issue of how to talk about ‘discourse’ in a Foucauldian sense alongside a conceptualisation of ‘ideology’. Similar reservations over the use of the term ideology in critical theory have led many post-structuralist scholars to opt for ‘discourse’ (“as a count and noncount noun”) over ‘ideology’ (O’Regan & Betzel 2015:282). They are thus slippery terms, and used in slippery, and sometimes interchangeable (ibid), ways across fields. I have tried for a great part of my doctoral journey to find ‘order’ in the discourse/ideology debate; I have come to accept that there is no order - rather, they are terms with multiple meanings and multiple histories. Acknowledging the inability to make both terms sit together neatly, I thus propose not to delineate the boundaries of discourse and ideology, but rather to expand upon the theorisations of the terms that I have found useful for the analysis of my data, and how I see them working productively together as analytical tools.
3.3.1 Discourse

I understand discourse as a social practice that “determines and reproduces social structure” (Fairclough 1989:38). Discourse is ways of saying and ways of doing “which provide a language for talking about - i.e., a way of representing - a particular kind of knowledge about a topic” (Hall 1992:187). Hall draws on Said’s (1978) work on orientalism to demonstrate the workings of discourse in the production of the idea of the ‘West’, which “became both the organizing factor in a system of global power relations and the organizing concept or term in a whole way of thinking and speaking” (ibid). These ways of saying and doing are not “the result of chance, or coincidental” (Duchêne 2008:29), but rather are “anchored in a series of constraints and possibilities” (ibid:30) that are shaped through institutions, ideology and history. Discourse can be understood as a semiotic phenomenon, in that it produces meaning within a historically and socially bound context, and simultaneously reflects and shapes social order and our interactions with society (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006). Discourse is therefore produced through practice, making the notion of discourse itself dialectical: “discourse has effects upon social structures, as well as being determined by them, and so contributes to social continuity and social change” (Fairclough, 1989:17).

In this way, discourse has real effects, in that it produces meaningful knowledge “that shapes perceptions and practice” and has further effects on the production of other discourses (Hall 1992:225), on what can and cannot be said, what can and cannot be considered as ‘truth’ (within the confines of a particular discourse) or as ‘knowledge’. As such, discourse is “part of the way in which power operates” (ibid:225), because “no knowledge can occur without power” (Duchêne 2008:25; Foucault 1980a). For Foucault, rather than being imposed in a ‘top-down’ manner, power is exercised through individuals, through our actions, practices and beliefs:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also
Thus, for Foucault, the flow of power and control of individuals is not wielded uniquely by a dominant group or class. Rather, power is located in rituals, beliefs, practices, language, and actions; power flows through the discourses that individuals are constantly engaging in, and it is these discourses that ‘shape’ our actions. Power is thus dynamic; it cannot be attributed to one place but rather is an everyday practice. It also is not only to be correlated with relations of domination or oppression. On the contrary, power is productive: “In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault 1995:194). In this way, discourses are “both an instrument and an effect of power”, but they can also be “a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” because, while discourse reinforces power, it also “undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” (Foucault 1978:101). This makes discourse a site of struggle, as I seek to show in the following chapters.

In this sense, as Hall and others have argued, discourse here shares some similarities with certain sociological conceptions of ideology (1992; see also Määttä 2014; Purvis & Hunt 1993). Ideology, however, was problematised and promptly abandoned by Foucault on several accounts, the most prominent being that “it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth” (Foucault 1980a:118). Indeed, Pennycook problematises the idea of emancipation through ideological unveiling or awareness: “it can appear to suggest that people (“the people,” “the masses,” “women,” “the working class,” “minorities”) are ideologically duped and need to have the veil of mystification lifted from them” (Pennycook, 2001:35). For Foucault, there can only ever be “effects of truth” (1980a:118) which are neither inherently true nor false but rather produced inside discourses, which create “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1977). Following Foucault, this study also rejects the pejorative theorisation that presents ideology as a type of false consciousness.

Of course, however, the Marxist understanding of ideology that was rejected by Foucault is far from the only interpretation of the term, and Foucault’s notion of discourse “incorporates many aspects of existing theories
of ideology” (Määätä 2014:68) (or, conversely, we could argue, many existing theories of ideology have taken inspiration from the work of Foucault). Distinctions between ideology and discourse are thus often unclear (ibid, see also Woolard 1998). I maintain however that it is possible to bring together concepts from a relatively diverse range of scholars without losing the theoretical depth of their arguments. For example, as Eagleton points out, while Bourdieu did not engage much with the term ideology, his work can be seen as complementing ideas of ideology or discourse “with empirically detailed accounts of ideology as ‘everyday life’” (1991:158). Bourdieu’s conceptual toolkit, therefore, can be seen as an elaboration of the mechanisms, or a way to understand how “ideology is continuously supported by habitualised every-day patterns” (Rehmann 2013:233). Similarly, I argue that ideology and discourse in a Foucauldian sense can be brought together productively if we understand discourse as the site of ideology (Blommaert 2005a): “Ideology is therefore a construction; it is action; it is power; but it is also discourse” (Duchêne 2008:28). This interpretation is aligned with Williams’ understanding of ideology as something that encompasses not only the product but also the process: “For the practical links between ‘ideas’ and ‘theories’ and the ‘production of real life’ are all in this material social process of signification itself” (1977:70). In particular, as I will argue, drawing on linguistic anthropological understandings of ideology does not dilute the concept of discourse, but rather the use of ideology in linguistic anthropology shifts the focus onto certain positions of power. That is, like Foucault, it rejects the pejorative sense of ideology as a type of false consciousness, but retains the term nevertheless in order to point to how certain ‘truths’ become more crystallised through their associations with power within certain political economic formations. That is, in Purvis & Hunt’s words, “what makes some discourses ideological is their connection with systems of domination” (1993:496, see also Eagleton 1991, Williams 1977). This does not contradict Foucault’s theorisation of capillary power: “It is perfectly possible to agree with Nietzsche and Foucault that power is everywhere, while wanting for certain practical purposes to distinguish between more and less central instances of it” (Eagleton 1991:8). As Heller and McElhinny argue, “the notion of ideology is most useful when used to discuss relations of power” (2017:7). They build on Eagleton’s (1991) argument that links ideology to “ideas that
legitimate dominant political powers” but, importantly, extend it to “the legitimation of any form of power (or attempt at it)” and thus:

to discourses and practices that constitute their expression and their workings, whether they are explicit or implicit, and whether held by those who benefit most or, in ways that may be harder to explain, by those who do not benefit much at all (2018:7)

Having elaborated on how I plan to work with notions of discourse and ideology, I will now sketch out my understanding of the language ideologies perspective, which, according to its advocates, can provide “an additional tool, or level of analysis” (Kroskrity 2000:3).

3.3.2 Language ideologies

The prominent place of language in the workings of ideology has been established since the beginnings of ideological research, evident in the work of Vološinov and Althusser (Flubacher, in press). However, it is within the field of linguistic anthropology that the concept of language ideologies has most keenly flourished following a shift in the field that moved away from description and linguistic structures in a Boasian or Chomskyian sense to a conceptualisation that included “speakers along with their languages” (Kroskrity 2010:194). While, much as for the term ideology, language ideologies are not understood theoretically in the same way by all, there are particular understandings that I find fruitful. For Woolard, language ideologies are “[r]epresentations, whether explicit or implicit, that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world” (1998:3), with “emphasis on the social origins of thought and representation, on their roots in or responsiveness to the experience of a particular social position” (ibid:10). However, it is Kroskrity’s definition that I believe provides the most useful explanation of language ideologies as:

beliefs, feelings, and conceptions about language structure and use which often index the political economic interests of individual speakers, ethnic and other interest groups, and nation states. These conceptions, whether explicitly articulated or embodied in communicative practice, represent incomplete, or
‘partially successful’, attempts to rationalize language usage; such rationalizations are typically multiple, context-bound, and necessarily constructed from the sociocultural experience of the speaker (2010:192)

Kroskrity’s definition is useful on several accounts. Firstly, his inclusion of ‘feelings’ allows for an exploration of “the less acknowledged aspect of language ideologies as relatively automatic aesthetic response” (2004:512). Here, he acknowledges Raymond Williams’ work on structures of feeling, but one could just as easily forge connections here with Bourdieu’s work on the habitus and hexis and the way in which embodied reactions are deeply imbricated within, and mediated by, ideology. As Eagleton argues, while ideology was not of primary concern to Bourdieu as a term in itself, the habitus is relevant to studies of ideology:

because it tends to induce in social agents such aspirations and actions as are compatible with the objective requirements of their social circumstances. At its strongest, it rules out all other modes of desiring and behaving as simply unthinkable. Habitus is thus ‘history turned into nature’, and for Bourdieu it is through this matching of the subjective and the objective, what we feel spontaneously disposed to do and what our social conditions demand of us, that power secures itself (1991:156)

These references to ‘aspirations’, ‘desire’ or ‘feelings’ thus acknowledge the role of affect in the reproduction of ideologies and thus of social configurations. For Penz & Sauer, affect is “always socially and culturally mediated and defined and not as something ‘natural’. Affects do not follow solely a neuronal logic but are inseparably linked with social meaning” (2019:32). Their “socially patterned and distributed” nature thus “implies that the patterns of affect are intrinsically linked with and embedded in political economic relations” (Flubacher 2020a:121). In Chapter 6 I argue, along with Park, that affect has “important consequences for cultural and social formations and distinctions” (Park 2015:60; see also Bae & Park 2020; Penz & Sauer 2019), and thus is fundamental in understanding the reproduction and transformation of inequality through embodied social practice.

Secondly, in Kroskirty’s definition we see an explicit connection between ideology and political economic interests, which highlights how
language ideologies are never about language alone (Woolard 1998). This theorisation of ideology departs from older representations of ‘culture’ or ‘worldview’ and in doing so “signals new awareness of and attention to the way in which the salience and prevalence of particular ideas are themselves forms of power” (Philips 1998:213). A focus on power and its connection to political economic conditions does not imply, however, a pre-existing power basis: “social relations and materiality are not presymbolic but rather are constituted, not just sustained, through symbolic activity” (Woolard 1998:10). Further, such a framing allows for a multiplicity model of ideology as:

not merely those ideas which stem from the “official culture” of the ruling class but rather a more ubiquitous set of diverse beliefs, however implicit or explicit they may be, used by speakers of all types as models for constructing linguistic evaluations and engaging in communicative activity (Kroskrity 2004:497)

As such, a Linguistic Anthropological interpretation of ideology allows for an understanding of how “like the social makeup of dominant groups themselves, their [dominant groups] ideologies are rarely monolithic, nor always stable” (Gal 1998:320), and how “the plurality of meaningful social divisions (class, gender, clan, elites, generations, and so on) within sociocultural groups” has “the potential to produce divergent perspectives expressed as indices of group membership” (Kroskrity 2010:197). This does not, however, assume equality, as there is an explicit interest in what allows for “some ideologies to gain the assent or agreement even of those whose social identities, characteristics, and practices they do not valorize or even recognize” (Gal 1998:321, her emphasis). Drawing on Gramsci, Gal reminds us that hegemony is “never absolute or total” but rather “it is a process, constantly being made, partial, productive of contradictory consciousness in subordinate populations, therefore fragile, unstable, vulnerable to the making of counterhegemonies” (1998:321). Along with the connection to “power, politics, interest, and social action”, multiplicity is a key component of ideology for Gal and Irvine, as “to speak of an ‘ideology’ always implies that there is an alternative one that somebody else, differently positioned, might hold” (2019:13). An understanding of ideology as “dimensions of practices
that are deployed in constructing and naturalizing discursive authority” (Briggs 1998:232) thus shifts the focus onto how certain ideologies become hegemonic, in a Gramscian sense, and who is in a position (or not) to produce such knowledge (Heller & McElhinny 2017). In Briggs’ words,

By succeeding in according hegemony to a particular ideology, one can enjoy a position of authority by virtue of having demonstrated control over the process of shaping how discourse can legitimately be produced, circulated, and rendered authority—that is, in Foucault’s terms, over regimes of truth and knowledge. If access can be restricted to the use of discursive practices that are deemed to embody these dominant ideologies, then the champions of these ideologies can provide themselves with an even more effective means of creating social power (1998:245).

This is why, for Briggs, contestation is a key component in the process of a particular ideology becoming dominant, as ideologies become hegemonic through erasing opposing “competing discursive propositions” and thus constructing one discursive regime “as being the only valid path to ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’” (ibid:247). It is thus of key interest to focus on the processes that allow for (or contest) such domination.

3.3.3 Language ideological concepts
Within the linguistic anthropological tradition of language ideologies, there are numerous concepts that focus on the processual nature of ideology, that is, not only of ideology as a ‘product’ – such as the ideology of native speakerism or monoglot ideology (Silverstein 1996) – but on how dominant ideologies come to be. For Briggs, in order to understand “how ideologies of language become dominant and how others are suppressed” and to spot “the broad range of ways that contestation takes place”, one requires “sophisticated ways of studying the complex relations that obtain between language ideologies and discursive practices” (1998:249). We have already discussed discourse as the site of ideology, but there are equally further concepts that shed light on how this happens within discursive practices that I have found fruitful for my analysis.
- **Indexicality**

For Silverstein, “language, like any social semiotic, is indexical in its most essential modality” (1998:128). To take an interest in the semiotics of language is necessarily to be faced “first (and ultimately) with indexical facts—indexical facts "all the way down,"” (ibid:138). Finding its roots in the work of Pierce, and notably developed by Silverstein (1976), indexicality is “the semiotic operation of juxtaposition, whereby one entity or event points to another” (Bucholtz & Hall 2005:378). The indexical connection between form and its social meaning is not accidental, but has a “historical layer”, which “provides for relatively stable trajectories and patterns of indexicality” (Blommaert 2006:520). The notion of indexical orders in particular helps us to see how social work is done, as if a first order indexical allows us to ‘spot’ a correlation between linguistic form and some kind of social identity – for example, hearing a [v]/[w] merger and correlating this with a notion of ‘Indian’ English – then second and higher orders push this indexical sign further to social meanings attached to that identity (for example, that the speaker is incompetent or uneducated). As Woolard writes:

> actors explain and naturalize the sociolinguistic associations they’ve registered through a cultural template, e.g. accounting for a way of speaking as not only associated with certain contexts or speakers but as sounding more logical, or tougher, or more authentic (2020:8)

This – the correlation between sign and the social meaning it points to – is a highly ideological process: “indexicality produces ideology through practice” (Bucholtz & Hall 2005:380), but in implicit ways, which thus renders indexical correlations ‘normal’ or ‘evident’, and which is a fundamental requirement for indexical processes to occur: they “cannot operate successfully if their ideological foundation is exposed” (ibid). To focus on orders of indexicality allows us to capture “the moment-by-moment perceptions of stability in language use” (Blommaert 2006:521). They do not, however, “suggest total stability or homogeneity because they are subject to permanent re-enactment in situated communicative practices” (ibid) and thus are susceptible to change over time and space.
Alongside indexicality, the work of Irvine and Gal (2000, 2019) has been particularly illuminating in exploring “the mediating role of language ideologies” (Kroskrity 2010:200), notably with their conceptualisation of iconisation (later termed rhematisation), erasure and fractal recursivity. These concepts work together, overlapping and mutually reinforcing one another. Firstly, iconisation (rhematisation), refers to the process by which:

a contrast of indexes is interpreted as a contrast in depictions: A conjecture focuses on some perceptible contrast of quality in indexical signs and takes that contrast to depict – not only to index – a contrast in the conditions under which the signs were produced; some contrast of quality in what was indexed (Gal & Irvine 2019:19).

Within this process, the quality in question is often interpreted as the cause (ibid), and in a rather cyclical process: “speakers are taken to be the way that they supposedly sound (e.g., noble, lazy, rational, simple, elegant). In turn, that sound comes to be heard as itself epitomizing that quality” (Woolard 2020:10). In Chapter 8, I argue that the perceived ‘rudeness’ or ‘harshness’ of the dialect spoken by many students in the NGO is widely interpreted as having been influenced by the ‘rudeness’ or ‘impoliteness’ of the caste group with whom this language is associated.

- Erasure

Irvine and Gal’s second term, erasure is a means of “simplifying ideological work” (Gal & Irvine 2019:21), through which only some elements are focused on while those which do not fit the ideology are erased (Gal 1998, Gal & Irvine 2019). This of course, does not mean that the actual element in question is erased, rather it “simply implies an explanation or explaining away the phenomenon that does not fit, leaving the observer’s vision of the world intact” (Gal & Irvine 2019:21). In Chapter 8, I demonstrate how the ability to be vulgar (or ‘rude’) in English is erased within discourses that construct Hindi, English and local vernaculars along an axis of differentiation around politeness, rudeness and civilisedness in which local vernaculars are discriminated against.
- **Fractal Recursivity**

  The third term, fractal recursivity, “is that aspect of ideological work that reiterates the comparison created by the axis of differentiation, altering the sets of objects that are compared, under contrast” (Gal & Irvine 2019:20). In this sense, we see in Chapter 8 how English and Hindi are posited along the above-mentioned axis of differentiation, and how, through processes of fractal recursivity, when Hindi is discursively compared with local vernacular languages, it is the local vernaculars that take on the ‘rude’ nature, while Hindi regains prestige through its association with the (Hindu) nation. It is here that we can see how erasure is a key part of fractal recursivity, as “fractal recursions rely on further erasures too, for in order to grasp the reiteration of the analogy, one has to ignore the ways in which the reproduction is never exact” (ibid:73). Importantly, fractal recursivity does not imply static categorisation. Rather, as I demonstrate, “a language or people can be deemed complex and refined at one social scale without affecting the firm ideological conviction of their primitive simplicity when considered at another scale” (Woolard 2020:11)

- **Axes of differentiation**

  Finally, in their later work, Irvine and Gal introduce a fourth element to their conceptualisation of semiotic processes of ideology – axes of differentiation. In this vein, in Chapter 8, in order to explore the personhood that has come to be attached to speaking English, I argue that it is important first and foremost to demonstrate how English speakerhood gains its meaning partly through its contrast with other available personhoods attached to the languages the students have in their repertoires. Much like for indexicality, these semiotic processes work to normalize and naturalise and thus create “discursive authority” (Gal 1998:329). Importantly, they provide justification for social differentiation and thus “‘explain’ or rationalize, differences of social rank” (Gal & Irvine 2019:31).

  It is this final point which provides the most salient link to the following section, that is, how ideological processes work to legitimise and organise relations within specific political-economic formations (Duchêne & Heller 2012:3). In this sense, discourse becomes a site of struggle over “definitions of reality between groups with different positions in a political
economy” (Gal 1989:359). Indeed, for Park, exploring language ideologies is what allows us to focus on “how political economy and semiosis go hand in hand”, as “semiotic mediation” plays an important role in enabling “material processes within social order” and, inversely, “semiotic work is conditioned by the material basis upon which social relationships are configured” (2009:18)

3.4 Political economy

As Heller argues, through an interrogation of discourse or, more specifically, of struggles over the control of discursive space, one is able to gain a handle on the issues in play. In order to offer an explanatory gloss of why such action happens, however, we are required to focus on the political economic conditions, given that discourses “are grounded, and emerge from political economic conditions that frequently entail differences of interest, and concomitant, albeit often lop-sided, struggle” (2001b:138). An interest in political economy thus forces us to look at the ways in which “individuals are embedded in specific socio-political, economic and institutional structures” (Flubacher et al 2018). It requires us to inquire into the means by which resources obtain and retain value, and their particular trajectories (who has access, who consumes, who can or does not), and thus sheds light on “the way language emerges as a key site of possibility/impossibility where speakers can gain access to the valuation as well as to the production, distribution, and consumption of symbolic and material resources” (Del Percio et al 2017:55). In turn, this allows for an understanding of inequality that explicitly situates local practice within wider historical and material systems and conditions (ibid). This does not, however, stand in contradiction with the stated underpinnings that form this study. Rather, this study proposes that one can argue for the imperative of taking into account structural politico-economic conditions without presupposing a determining economic base of which language is merely an effect. Instead, I opt for a “processual” framing, that is, one that theorises political economy as:

[A] historically situated, dynamic, and contradictory activity that is discursively enacted and organized by institutions and actors through the mobilization of forms of knowledge, thus justifying and legitimating these
activities and their consequences on the roles and functions of languages and speakers (Del Percio et al 2017:57)

With its roots partly in Bourdieu’s (2010) conception of symbolic exchange and capital as extended to the non-economic (but not disconnected from the economic) realm, such a framing invokes the marketisation of language (Kelly-Holmes & Mautner 2010), that is, how language can be converted, or not, into other types of symbolic capital (or, at the very least, is perceived as allowing for such). To evoke a language and political economy perspective, then, means acknowledging how language can be constructed as a resource in exchange for material or symbolic gain (Bourdieu 2010, Del Percio et al. 2017; Duchêne et al 2013; Heller 2011; Duchêne & Heller 2012). It also means investigating the conditions under which differentiated people gain access to, or are prevented from gaining access to the (social) valuation processes of, such resources. Specifically, this means accounting for i) how resource distribution is regulated and the symbolic meaning attributed to such resources, ii) the conditions of exchangeability of resources and how this may or may not be subject to change over time, iii) how specific people are positioned “in ways that constrain their access to resources and hence their ability to mobilize them, and mobilize them convincingly, in specific moments” (Heller 2011:10). This final point is particularly salient for this research, as it guides us towards asking who benefits, and who does not from such systems of organisation, as well as who can and who cannot successfully convert their symbolic capital (Del Percio et al. 2017), and thus how inequality is perpetuated. Further, it allows us to register an array of tensions that emerge around language within current political economic conditions:

1. A tension between the celebration of language and communication as an economic resource and the effects of these discourses on how languages, and especially their speakers, are categorized, selected, and hierarchized
2. A tension between the potential of language to enable access to symbolic and material capital and the complex logics, interests, and technologies regulating the convertibility of language into capital in specific markets
3. A tension between current discourses on the emancipatory nature of language and the invisibilization of the structural causes that exclude speakers from recognition and capital, a condition that leads society to hold
affected speakers responsible for their own social and economic marginality.
(Del Percio et al. 2017:69)

In this vein, in Chapter 5, I demonstrate how current and historical conditions have shaped the symbolic capital of English, how its status as a highly prestigious resource is reproduced within the current political economic order, and thus how discursive struggle over ‘ownership’ of, or pride in, Indian English ultimately fall flat within a global, colonial capitalist system that only rewards certain prestige forms and in which jobs are allocated to those who can mobilize such forms (e.g. in call centres). In Chapter 7, I explore how the NGO reproduces discourses of the ‘emancipatory nature’ of language, and demonstrate how students negotiate the tensions within this discourse. I interrogate the limits of the cultural capital of English as a resource, arguing that what is evidently required of the students if they want to ‘cash in’ on their capital is the entire ‘package’ of associated capital – what I call English speakerhood – which is built on the value systems and behaviour of the middle classes and the upper castes, as well as colonial orders (see Chapter 8).

A focus on political economy, then, is essential in understanding how inequality continues to be perpetuated through language – despite much popular discourse that, in India at least, holds access to language (here, English) as the key to prosperity (Proctor 2014; Park 2011). Further, such a focus is particularly necessary, as many have argued, in the current moment. That is, in what is often referred to as late capitalism (Del Percio et al. 2017, Duchêne & Heller 2012; Flubacher et al. 2018), in which:

language plays a particularly central role not only because of its place in the regulation and legitimization of political economic spaces but also because of the emergence of the tertiary sector as a defining element of the globalized new economy (Duchêne & Heller 2012:3)

The deregulation of markets, national restructuring, and the transition to new global service and knowledge industries within late capitalism have resulted in a “transnational situation of increased economic competition for access to resources, labor, and capital” (Del Percio et al. 2017:58). This globalised new economy has fundamentally shaped the linguistic
marketplace (Duchêne et al. 2013), particularly given the transition among most capitalist countries to a service industry for which language ‘skills’ are essential (Heller et al. 2017:6). Against the backdrop of global precarity, unstable markets and increased competition for jobs, language thus forms a key part of contemporary struggles for (often) scarce resources (Heller et al. 2017; Del Percio et al. 2017). In this way, we see a “recasting” of language from discourse of “pride” (e.g. of identity, heritage) to a discourse of “profit” (Duchêne & Heller 2012), which frames language as an investment, a pre-requisite for employability (Flubacher et al. 2018; Zimmerman & Muth 2020) (although, as many have shown, the two framings often co-occur). This discursive shift is rooted in shifting political economic conditions that have material consequences for language users (Duchêne & Heller 2012). This has resulted in the last few decades in a proliferation of research on neoliberalism, under which the free markets that define the era of late capitalism are extended to encompass the way individuals lead their lives, and their languages. Thus, having looked at the influence of colonialism and coloniality of English in India in the previous chapter, I now turn to a theorisation of neoliberalism which, as I demonstrate in Chapter 7, is a dominant force that shapes the students’ experiences with English. However, the discussion below should not be considered in isolation from the concepts explored in Chapter 3 (class, caste and colonialism) as they too make up a key part of the political-economic circumstances. I begin with a theorisation of neoliberalism in a global sense, before addressing its workings in the Indian context, in order to pave the way for my argument in later chapters of the importance of addressing how these multiple logics co-exist.

3.4.1 Neoliberalism
In its very basic sense neoliberalism refers to material shifts in political-economic structure that occurred in the aftermath of WW2 and more predominantly from the 1970s in the West (Harvey 2005). It signalled a transition into more intense liberalisation, characterised by massive privatisation, the deregularisation of the market, the decline of the welfare state, and the widespread implementation of austerity measures (Urla 2019; Allan & McElhinny 2017; Gray, O’Regan & Wallace 2018). Not everyone, however, frames or uses neoliberalism for analytical purposes in the same
way (Flubacher & Del Percio 2017; Ganti 2014) and this rather “elusive” (Zimmerman & Flubacher 2017) concept covers a wide range of referents, from the aforementioned economic policies and developmental models, to an ideology and mode of governance (Ganti 2014). Neoliberalism, then, is not an organized or coherent ‘package’ but rather a vague organisation of practices (Block 2018), and is thus “simultaneously economic, political, social, geographical and cultural” (ibid:74).

As I will argue, I am particularly interested in how the shift to neoliberalism represents “a new kind of cultural order” (Urla 2019:266 ; see also Dardot & Laval 2014), one which focuses on how human action comes to be guided by market exchange beyond the purely economic realm (Harvey 2005). Contrary to liberalism, which sees the economic and non-economic as separate spheres, neoliberalism “interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life” (Allan & McElhinny 2017:80), and thus “this rationality becomes a form of governance” (Martín Rojo & Del Percio 2019:12; see also Martín Rojo 2018). These notions have been of particular interest to anthropological research, with many scholars turning their attention to the “ideological dimension” of neoliberalism through a focus on the enterprising individual and the notion of governmentality, or the techniques of management of the self (Ganti 2014) that make individuals responsible for their own success. Although individual responsibility is not an entirely new phenomenon, it is “further accentuated under the neoliberal paradigm which is firmly anchored in the idea of individuals as self-branding entrepreneurs, who are in charge of their success” (Zimmerman & Flubacher 2017:208, see also Gershon 2011). Following Flubacher and Del Percio (2017) and Gooptu (2013), I am interested here less in the state policies themselves, and more in the everyday practice of individuals as they navigate neoliberalisation, and how neoliberal rationalities are taken up by individual actors and reproduced, appropriated and contested.

To do so, I draw on the notion of neoliberal governmentality (Dardot & Laval 2014; Foucault 2008), or the processes through which market principles such as freedom, quality, flexibility, competition, choice and constant improvement are extended to individuals and their social lives, and come to regulate people’s conduct as well as the ways they understand themselves and others (Martín Rojo and Del Percio, 2019; Urla 2019). This
‘regulation’ aspect of governmentality, however, is different from more widely understood techniques of regulation (such as repression) and sheds light instead on post-structural understandings of power, namely that conceptualized by Foucault (1980), in which power is perceived as a productive force that is dependent upon individuals’ agency to act within a specific set of limits (Urla 2019, Luke 2017). In Inoue’s words, “governmentality concerns itself with ‘governing’ individuals indirectly and at a distance, through their own free will, and pursuit of their own interests, as the mechanism of power” (2007:81). In this sense, neoliberal governmentality “makes people voluntarily discipline themselves to behave and think in certain ways, of ‘their own choice,’ and for ‘their own happiness and fulfilment’ (ibid:86). Using governmentality as an analytical lens for the study of neoliberalism, language and social mobility, then, allows us to explore “the conditions of possibility for how we think and act upon ourselves and language” (Urla 2019:265), and thus sheds light on to the “assemblage of techniques, forms of knowledge, and experts that seek to guide, rather than force, the linguistic conduct and subjectivity of the populace and/or the self” (ibid:262). In this sense, it allows me to interrogate the extent to which the students’ investment in education and English forms part of the neoliberal imperative, and how they frame their own agency and experiences of structural oppression within or alongside a hegemonic neoliberal ideology.

3.4.2 Neoliberalism in education

As Block (2018) has highlighted, education is a domain that has been particularly dominated by market logic: “it has been thoroughly neoliberalized in most parts of the world.” (Block 2018:73; Gray et al. 2018). For Park, education is a particularly illuminating site to see “how such political economic conditions are deeply interconnected with problems of subjectivity”, as “neoliberalism is closely invested in the formation of selves which becomes a mechanism for molding ideal neoliberal subjects” (2017:82). Such discourses are particularly pervasive in Higher Education, but can also be observed in state-led or NGO educational institutions for job seekers globally, which demonstrates the “colonisation by business logic” (Martín Rojo and Del Percio 2019:1) of domains that were previously not governed by market principles. Through this transformation, “students are thus rethought as entrepreneurial selves who make rational choices” (Zimmerman &
According to these neoliberal principles, students are responsible for their own personal and professional success, which they ostensibly attain by continually acquiring commodifiable skills. Within such a framing, the onus for success is placed squarely on the individual – their choices, their qualifications, their accumulated skills – and accountability is thus shifted away from social inequalities or the failing of the state and placed squarely on the shoulders of the flexible, competitive, individual actor.

As Urciuoli argues, within neoliberal discourses, learning becomes re-signified as a skill: “social acts are recast in a transactional or entrepreneurial frame and actors’ segmented selves are recast as assemblages of productive elements, as bundles of skills” (Urciuoli 2008:224). These ‘skills discourses’ in turn shape the demands of the labour market, and the subjectivity of students themselves in how they both imagine and present themselves as workers (ibid). Students and jobseekers alike are exhorted to develop neoliberal subjectivities whereby they seek to continually – and willingly – enhance their competitive edge by investing in self-development and skills accumulation (Gershon 2011; Urciuoli 2008) in order to meet the demands of the labour market (Del Percio & Van Hoof 2017; Urla 2019). Thus, the project is never-ending, as the ‘good’ neoliberal subject is invested in learning all life long, in a process of “continuous self-development” (Martín Rojo & Del Percio 2019: 13) and demonstrable flexibility (Martín Rojo 2019; Flubacher et al. 2018). And this is not simply a question of accumulating skills. Flubacher demonstrates how workers narratively package the ‘self’ not only in terms of skills but also their trajectories to appear “sellable”, thus turning themselves into products (see also Garrido 2020). The self thus becomes a business, a Me. Inc (Gershon 2018). This idea of ‘packaging’ oneself as a product or business thus sheds light on what is most valued under neoliberal conditions. That is, the accumulation of skills is often less about the specific skills themselves (or performance thereof) and more about “indexing a particular kind of self”, that is a self which is “responsible, autonomous, self-sufficient, and entrepreneurial” (Allan & McElhinny 2017:84).

3.4.3 Neoliberalism and language learning
While education has certainly been flagged as a domain heavily dominated by neoliberalism, language has taken up a central position (Park 2017) and indeed
is doubly imbricated: “On the one hand there is the language of neoliberalism itself, and on the other there is the role of certain languages under neoliberalism” (Gray et al. 2018:473). With regard to the latter, when framed in discourses of profit (Duchène and Heller 2012; Martín Rojo 2018), language becomes a resource for students to acquire in order to increase their human capital and exchange for further monetary gain (Duchène and Daveluy 2015; Gao 2017). Thus, we see the rise of the “self-made speaker” (Martín Rojo 2019), which brings to the forefront “the role of language in promoting (self)-investment in particular language forms and language learning practices for an economic convertibility or return” (Garrido & Sabaté-Dalmau 2019:1; Duchène 2016), as well as allowing for mobility (be it social or geographical) (ibid). Through discourses of language-learning-as-investment, language appears “pivotal for professional success” and language competencies are framed “as a central aspect of employability” (Flubacher et al. 2018:14). In her study of work integration programmes for migrants, Allan demonstrates how “language was often construed as the key to labour market integration” (2016:10). The notion of ‘integration’ calls attention to how language skills are not only perceived as vital for employability, but also for what they index about those who ‘invest’ in language learning. In other words, in such discourses, language becomes “a key resource that stands for internationalism, progress and modernity as well as for high quality, economic prosperity and development” (Flubacher & Del Percio 2017:7). In the context of migrant activation programmes, investing in ‘language’ thus marks one as a neoliberal subject, but also as one who is willing to integrate (Allan 2013, Flubacher et al. 2018). However, not all languages are considered ‘good’ investments, as not all languages hold equal symbolic value (Flubacher et al. 2018), and indeed only certain varieties of languages such as English are exchangeable on the linguistic market (Martín Rojo 2018; O’Regan 2021, in press). Acknowledging the symbolic capital of different languages and variants and their capitalisation and decapitalisation is fundamental in shedding light on practices of inequality that provide obstacles for those who seek mobility through language investment. That is, it highlights how “social agents do not exist in a vacuum and, closely related to social ideas of legitimacy, cannot have a guaranteed return on investment and thus cannot
plan and execute capitalization moves without the support of others” (Flubacher et al 2018:7)

Furthermore, exploring how different language resources gain or lose capital across labour markets also requires taking into account the ideological processes that mediate the valuation of these resources (Gal 2012) as well as ideologies attached to speakers. As Urla reminds us, the value attached to languages is “never simply a question of rational cost–benefit calculus” (2019:268). Various forms of bi and multilingualism are not celebrated, or are indeed stigmatised, or taken advantage of in the workplace with no compensation (ibid; see also Duchêne 2011). Importantly, Urla argues, “Language ideology, class, and racialization are key to these processes” (ibid:268). One important element here is that of tensions between ideologies of language as skill and those of language as a marker of essentialised belonging (Allan & McElhinny 2017). Drawing on Woolard’s (2008) differentiation of ideologies of ‘authenticity’ and ‘anonymity’, Martín Rojo demonstrates the tension between an ideology of language as resource which is “socially neutral, universally available, and to some extent international” – what I refer to in Chapter 5 as English as a disembodied resource – and an ideology of authenticity “according to which the value of a language is located in its relation to a particular community” (2018:558). Park demonstrates this tension poignantly, arguing that looking at language ideologies allows us to better understand the neoliberalisation of language learning in Korea, as the ideology of Koreans as incompetent speakers of English fuels the perceived need for constant investment in language training. “These language ideologies”, he writes, “work to anchor the broader neoliberal discourses of English to mundane, everyday practices, so that the English frenzy becomes a force that deeply permeates people’s practical lives” (2010:28). As such, he highlights how political economic conditions need to be explored in tandem with “semitic and ideological forces that are reproduced through everyday practices and multiple agents” (ibid). In other words, the economic rationalities through which Korean families frame English-language investment cannot be fully understood without an acknowledgement of how these choices are mediated through local language ideologies – here, the ideology of self-deprecation. In this vein, in later chapters I argue that students’ investment in English cannot be fully explained by a neoliberal
rationality – indeed, they demonstrate a critical response to such discourses – and rather needs to take into account wider processes of colonialism, caste and gender stigmatisation as well as class mobility.

The tensions discussed above are particularly salient in the case of English (Gao 2017, Proctor 2014, Park 2011). Palpable in the NGO was a shared belief by students that English will be their escape from the hopelessness they feel in their current situations. Many students shared anecdotes of acquaintances failing to secure jobs or promotions due to their lack of English; several recounted rumours of English speakers with no qualifications being hired for jobs on the spot. Here, English capital is coveted as the “key to material success in the modern world” (Park 2011:443; see also Allan 2013), and English incompetence is framed as “the only thing holding people back from enjoying the benefits of globalization: upward mobility, better jobs, social betterment, and movement into a “better” culture” (Proctor 2014:307). Constructed as such, the problem of social inequality can be “ostensibly easily rectified” (ibid) – English language training can provide one with the necessary capital to exchange for further economic, cultural and symbolic capital necessary for social mobility or to success. In other words, in such discourses, “rather than overcoming inequality, individuals just need to work to appear to be on the right side of the divide – and it is language that promises to do this work, irrelevant of other social categories or dynamics” (Kraft & Flubacher 2020:3)

This “ostensibly” (Proctor 2014:307) easy solution of acquiring English for social mobility overlooks how, for many speakers, the efforts of learning English do not always ‘pay off’ (Tabiola and Lorente 2017), be it due to the ever-moving goalposts of what counts as acceptable English (Park 2011), or for reasons related to race or gender stratification. In other words, English can never be a “transparent key to social inclusion” because what counts as good competence depends on the linguistic market, itself dependent on institutions of power (Park 2011:445). One can argue, therefore, that the students’ investment in the English language is not an investment in capital that can be traded for immediate gain, but rather in speculative capital (Duchêne & Daveluy 2015; Tabiola & Lorente 2017): an investment in the self that may or may not see returns, but which marks the students as self-investing, enterprising selves. Such an investment is speculative in that the intended
result is not just financial rewards, but also (arguably, more so) “the appreciation of the student’s human capital, measured primarily in partial estimates and holding no guarantee of future return” (Tabiola & Lorente 2017:133). And yet, students continue to invest even when they fail to see returns, in the hope that there may be some future compensation, or non-financial compensation in the form of self-esteem or respect from peers (ibid). In line with the discussions of affect earlier, for Bae & Park, the notion of ‘hope’, along with ‘fear’ is crucial to understanding how affect plays a key role in “rationalizing the entrepreneurial visions of the self that are valorized by neoliberalism” (2020:279, see also McElhinny 2010).

3.4.4 Erased inequalities
Yet, as Tabiola and Lorente argue, the failure of many language-investors to reap what they had hoped for is not simply an unfortunate side effect, but is rather in-built into the premise of neoliberal competition (2017:72). In other words, “the thriving of some requires the shedding of many” (ibid:72). It is not hard to speculate on who is likely to be ‘unlucky’ in such processes: those who simply do not have the resources or time to continually increase their portfolio (ibid, see also Park 2011). Many scholars point to the erasure of inequalities that is inherent to (and necessary for) neoliberal ideology. As Park shows through his analysis of media success stories in South Korea, the “good English” of those from privileged backgrounds is framed as testament to their own hard work and inherent worthiness (rather than as a product of their socio-economic background) which thus reinforces discourses of the ostensible fairness of the neoliberal linguistic market (2010:34). In such terms, those who fail must have simply lacked the drive, motivation, or talent to succeed: the unequal playing field is overlooked, or even justified through such narratives. Erased through such success story narratives is how “access is regulated by complex mechanisms of selection” (Flubacher et al. 2018:14). As we saw Chapter 2, many young Indians find themselves locked out of the private sector for reasons related explicitly to their caste, or to the unwritten rules of required symbolic capital associated with both the upper castes and the middle classes. Thus, simple correlations made between enhancing one’s skillset and employability thus “tend to unravel in practice” (Allan 2019:67). As Allan shows, migrants themselves criticise language and skills
programmes which are “unrealistic to many new immigrants, since by virtue of being marked as foreign or racialized, their skills and credentials were a priori devalued” (Allan 2016:627). By thrusting the responsibility onto the migrant, in this case, the “systemic discriminatory nature” of the labour market is overlooked (ibid) and attention is shifted away from structural problems and onto the migrant, who is then held responsible for their own success or failure (Urciuoli & LaDousa 2013; Allan 2013; Allan 2016: Allan & McElhinny 2017, Kraft & Flubacher 2020). Of course, as Del Percio & Van Hoof (2017) have argued, this does not mean that mastering such skills registers or gaining knowledge on how to navigate certain job markets is completely useless. Rather, the issue is that they do not attack the roots of the problem. For Del Percio & Van Hoof, more important than these programmes would be material resources such as seed loans or access to networks. In the context in which I have worked, I would argue that such material resources are indeed vital for the students; however, as Chapter 2 explored, a higher amount of assets does not provide one with the symbolic capital necessary for middle-class status, nor does it counter-act caste stigmatisation. This is, therefore, a double-pronged pursuit that requires, in Nancy Fraser’s terms (2003), a careful combination of recognition and redistribution, neither of which are accessible through skills training courses and, as we will see in the following chapters, are particularly hard to articulate within a dominant neoliberal ideology that is founded on the assumption of a level playing field.

3.4.5 Neoliberalism in India

While neoliberalism certainly shares commonalities across varied world contexts, it is nevertheless essential to take into account its local manifestations (Gray et al 2018; Gao 2017, Ong 2007) if we are to avoid totalising accounts (De Korne 2017) and shift the focus instead onto the situatedness of neoliberalism (Gooptu 2013) and how it interacts with local, historical epistemologies of personhood that affect the ways in which individuals and their languages are valued (Flubacher & Del Percio 2017:9; see also Park 2017). This means examining the different forms in which neoliberalism, as “a variegated phenomenon” (Block 2018:51) manifests itself in particular socio-historical and political economic contexts (Gao 2017) and how it gets entrenched with older, but still persistent histories of colonialism and imperial dispossession.
(Ganti 2014). Indeed, while, as I will demonstrate, the investment in English in India is indisputably enmeshed within neoliberal rationalities, it is important to remember that the capital of English pre-dates neoliberalism, and while certainly now deeply entangled with the neoliberalisation of education, it finds its roots in the colonial history of the language, as well as the ways in which it has become symbolic post-independence of a middle-class identity (Fernandes 2006). As such, in this section I turn to a brief overview of the history and practices of neoliberalism in India today.

As Joseph (2007) notes, the adoption of neoliberal theories and policies in India in the 1990s, much like elsewhere in the world, emerged from the crisis of the ‘developmental state’ that had defined Independent India. As the Congress Party was deemed to offer little in the way of resolve, there emerged an “ideological space in which neoliberal theories gained wide legitimacy” (2007:3213). Thus, the early 90s saw a shift from a state-led development model to pro-market liberalisation policies encompassing almost every aspect of the policy regime (Maiorano 2015), and an economic ‘boom’ as liberalisation led to an influx in privatisation. As Baviskar and Ray have summarised:

Liberalization introduced market forces into areas of the economy controlled by the state. It facilitated foreign direct investment and trade, freed business firms from the licence-permit raj, and eased banking regulations to increase consumer credit and encourage spending. At the centre of these policies was the idea of a middle class unleashed from the chastity belt of Nehruvian socialism and Indira-era austerities, finally able to savour the fruits of its disciplined and diligent work (2011:2)

Interestingly, however, and as I explore further in Chapter 7, Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan (2011; see also Ganti 2014) have documented how the neoliberal transformation of the Indian state did not, in fact, lead to a total roll-back on social welfare, and indeed such budgets are larger currently than they were in the Nehruvian era. They also argue, however, that this is not incompatible with the neoliberalisation of the state and is reflective instead of the state’s concern over violent pushback and mobilisation of marginalised peoples. This complexity notwithstanding, the neoliberalisation of education in India is particularly sharp, heralded as it is as a driver of the new economy (Chakravarti 2013). Following the reforms in the 1990s there has been a boom
in private English-medium schools, educational NGOs and coaching institutes to meet the growing demand for access to the language (Fernandes 2006). Alongside the growing demand for English, there is an increasing stress placed on the wider knowledge economy with particular emphasis on the IT industry, with numerous scholars documenting the proliferation of “a presumption of social mobility achieved through education and access to the new forms of labour enabled by global networks of information and communication technologies (ICTs)” (Nisbett 2013:175). As such, the privatisation of education as ‘big business’ has led to a readjustment of the purposes of education, as it shifts from being seen as “a state responsibility, a merit good that should be inclusive, morally, and socially transformative and directed towards building citizens and the nation for the future”, and becomes instead “an arena of individual achievement and economic success” (Chakravarti 2013:42).

Thus, new economic policies have seen a shift in ideological narratives of success and mobility, and the ushering in of ‘enterprising India’. Such enterprise culture is considered essential “in producing both dynamic economic actors for a globalized, liberalized economy and self-governed citizens of a state that is being re-engineered primarily as an enabler of the market” (Gooptu 2013:14). As Gooptu writes, the liberalisation era has been widely celebrated “for marking an epochal shift” which entailed “the creation of new Indians, whose dreams, passions, and desires fuel and propel all else, and whose powerful, newly liberated, capacity to aspire is in itself an asset” (2013:2). India has been thus reimagined as no longer dependent on the state, but as “as a nation of individual enterprising people” (ibid:7), responsible for their own future. With particular reference to popular Bollywood films centred on the theme of education, Chakravarti demonstrates how these films reproduce discourses of the ‘deserving poor’ and the “enterprising poor child who completes his education against all social impediments” (2013:47). Through such narratives, “[p]overty is increasingly seen as an individual disability, which may be overcome with determination, rather than as an endemic socio-political problem requiring global solutions” (ibid:49). All social inequality – be it caste, class or gender – can thus be overcome through the individual’s dedication to education and hard work.
In a similar vein, India has witnessed the emergence of skills development projects for poor youth, led predominantly by NGOs—“an essential feature of the decentralized and privatizing political-economic landscape associated with neoliberalism” (Ganti 2014:97). As Gooptu has shown in her exploration of volunteering as ethical social engagement and new spirituality, the emergence of such charity initiatives centred on poverty sees the displacement of the state by the “self-empowered, spiritually-armed, capable citizen protagonist”, thereby “allowing the state to abdicate its developmental and welfare role” (2016:972). She writes:

The emphasis on individual agency and personal empowerment in new spirituality valorizes the autonomous, self-governed, responsible citizen as the protagonist of a modern and modernizing nation. The model here is that of a spiritually enriched or spiritually literate self-sufficient citizen, enhancing his or her own personal well-being and in this way contributing to the highest common good—the good of the nation (ibid:974)

As such, responsibility for easing social problems is shifted onto the philanthropic individual, “as an individual protagonist and personal agent of national transformation, seeking to establish India as a global power through self-cultivation” while simultaneously adhering to “a middle-class and elite aversion to mass, electoral democratic party politics” and an “unwillingness to countenance an engagement with the systemic political and social underpinnings of inequality and poverty” (ibid:972).

Such programmes, be they led by public-private initiatives or funded by philanthropists, are framed “as a magic bullet, which could simultaneously generate employment, reduce poverty, educate and empower youth, and promote rural development” (Nambiar 2013:62) as they are “supposed to provide individuals with a coping strategy to deal with an uncertain work environment and ensure that they continue to persevere, to create a stable and secure future for themselves” (ibid). Drawing on the Planning Commission of India (2008 & 2011), Nambiar demonstrates how the programme’s focus on the individual constructs young Indians “as a ‘resource’ that must be harnessed through a range of human-resource development programmes that promote education, skills training, entrepreneurship, innovation, and self-employment” (ibid:60), thereby focusing on the “individual’s ability to
transform his or her life through these interventions, enabling them to benefit from growth” (ibid). Thus, the new economic policies not only fundamentally altered the organisation of multiple institutions in India but also provided a narrative that social mobility – regardless of caste, gender, religion, rurality and so on – is entirely possible through the application by individuals of hard work and perseverance, and that such a pursuit is crucial for the future of the postcolonial nation.

Further, the emphasis on soft skills development in such programmes – evident in the ‘skills gap’ discourse in national policy (Nambar 2013:60) – “expands the focus from the individual worker’s technical abilities to include also his or her personality and ‘embodied performance’ in the workplace” (ibid:61). As I argue in Chapter 7, the NGO that forms the basis of this study engages in such an endeavor as it seeks to provide students with English and other soft skills in order to equip them for the professional workplace and thus ostensibly assist them in their ascent to middle-classness. Part of this, as I show in Chapter 8, implies a restructuring of their ‘personalities’, values and bodies. With regard to bodies, as Pathak’s analysis of the notion of ‘presentability’ as “an embodied form of cultural capital” (2014:323) in India has demonstrated, presentability is a neoliberal technology of the self that works to discipline bodies: “being presentable (and therefore learning how to be presentable) in contemporary India is seen as being about maximizing one’s potential and being one’s best self” (ibid:324). In the wake of liberalisation that “allowed individuals the unprecedented freedom to work on their bodies, and therefore, their selves”, to not take care of one’s appearance is “a personal failure” (ibid). Thus, she argues, “with the commodification of beauty, looking good is not just a possibility but also an imperative; everyone not only can, but also should, look good” (ibid). Importantly, and in line with the class argument I presented in Chapter 2, to access such presentability is not only economic – one needs financial capital to purchase the right clothes or beauty products – but also requires ‘savvy’, a savoir faire of how to present oneself ‘correctly’. Such standards of presentability are, furthermore, fundamentally class and caste based and colonially-infused, although in ways that are more or less unmarked, with ‘negative’ presentability encompassing being overweight, having ‘bad skin’, being bald or with ‘bad hair’, using oil in the hair, wearing garish colours and ‘fake’ jewellery, “being ill at ease in Western
wear”, a lack of “confidence” in interactions and in body language and “a lack of cleanliness” (ibid:317). Pathak thus argues that this represents “a new category of middle-class neoliberal subjectivity, built around self-consciously inhabiting an urban, professional, middle-class aesthetic by exercising appropriate consumer agency” (ibid:326). To not appear presentable, she continues, has material consequences: “a body that does not look appropriate declares a person unfit for marriage, employment, or other opportunities” (ibid:324). Building on these arguments in Chapter 8, I argue that acquiring English not only entails the regulation of one’s communicative conduct (see Blommaert et al. 2009; Foucault 2007; Flubacher & Del Percio, 2017), but involves work on ones’ personality, moral values and body, so that language policy in educational settings and policing of speaking subjects become part of a larger biopolitical practice which aims to turn individuals into new subjects who are fit for modernity and contemporary capitalism.

3.4.6 Complexifying neoliberalism

However, despite the neoliberal imperative to acquire skills, learn English and discipline one’s body, this does not mean that students invest uncritically in such discourses. As Nisbett (2013) has shown, many participants questioned the relevance of working hard within a stratified society that benefits certain people, thus calling attention to the question of how far students internalise neoliberal rationality (Urciuoli 2008, 2019). Many scholars have documented that “technologies do not necessarily produce docile subjects” (Allan 2013:59) and indeed they do engage in contestation (De Korne 2017, Luke 2017, Upadhya 2013, Bell 2019, Del Percio & Wong 2019) even while they may also reproduce neoliberal values (Allan 2013). As such, neoliberalism is “far from being a totalizing rationale” but rather is engaged with dialectically on the ground (Flubacher & Del Percio 2017:10), which calls attention to what Gershon and LaDousa refer to as the “internal faultlines” (2019:4), or “the internal contradictions with neoliberal logics when put into practice” (ibid). For Allan and McElhinny, this means that the task for social scientists “is not simply to spot evidence of neoliberalism […] but to map precisely these forms of unevenness and contradiction” (2017:81) and “contextualize moments where neoliberal ideologies and practices arise alongside other policies” (ibid:92). This also means, necessarily, not only looking at how neoliberalism
erases systemic issues and thus harms marginalised groups in particular, but also considering how some may find solace and hope in such logics (Flubacher 2020b).

While, as Urla observes, the technologies that seek to produce the neoliberal self are well documented, “we know less about the uptake and what conditions it” (Urla 2019:268). Such an interest, Allan argues, is particularly suited to ethnography, as it can “show how neoliberal logics are productive in practice, but also where they fail to capture the contradictions of the labour market or political economic conditions” (2018:467; Urla 2019). Along with Urla, then, in Chapter 7 I seek to bring to the forefront the ways in which the students make sense of – as well as navigate, interact with and sometimes contest – the neoliberal discourses that inform the programme’s vision and that subject their bodies to practices of regulation. In doing so, I aim to highlight their multiple positionings – that is, how they both contest and embrace discourses, and how they attempt to make sense of it alongside their perceptions of obstacles to their social mobility. As Urla argues, such an analysis needs to be tied:

to the analysis of class, gender, racial, and other structural inequalities so that we can better understand the different ways that classes of people are positioned in relation to governmentalizing practices that seek to enlist actors in a self-responsible, entrepreneurial selfhood (2019:270)

Doing this allows us to shed light on “why and how some individuals resist and do not internalise these discourses” (Martín Rojo 2018:561). Of course, this does not mean that all students are equally positioned to mount powerful forms of resistance to the rationality. As Urciuoli notes, “a lot of workers do not have a lot of choice as to whether they believe or not” (2008:224) and any resistance ultimately takes place “within the scant wiggle room of the larger education policy assemblage and its gatekeeping measures” (Luke 2017:118) and thus, I argue, within wider political economic organisation and social stratification.
3.5 Conclusion
The first aim of this chapter has been to outline my epistemological and ontological assumptions, which have led me to an understanding of the social world as discursively constructed “on the basis of symbolic and material structural constraints that are empirically observable” (Heller 2008). The ‘slipperiness’ and complications of the overlapping terms of discourse and ideology notwithstanding, I have attempted to outline how both concepts are useful for this study if we accept a formulation that supposes discourse as a site of ideology. I then detailed particular concepts within the field of language ideologies that I have mobilised to understand my data, notably the concepts of indexicality, iconisation/rhematisation, erasure, fractal recursivity and axis of differentiation. I have argued that language ideologies and discourse need to be examined in tandem with political economic conditions – not as two distinct domains but as mutually constitutive. Here, I have drawn on a wealth of research on the neoliberalisation of education and language learning, emphasising the importance of addressing the potential for discursive struggle within hegemonic ideologies such as that as neoliberalism, and of paying attention to how neoliberalism takes shape within particular contexts in tandem with other logics such as class, caste and colonialism, and how students negotiate this on the ground. In sum, I hope to have demonstrated through this chapter how this thesis is “not about language per se. It is about the conditions and consequences of language for people” (Heller et al 2017:4). In the following chapter, I detail how I approached such questions methodologically.
Chapter 4 - Methodology

4.1 Introduction
In the previous chapters, I have documented the geographical and historical context within which my research took place, the academic debates in which I have anchored my work, and the conceptual tools with which I intend to analyse my data. In this chapter, I briefly recap the epistemological underpinnings of the research (see Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion). I then provide a description of, and justification for, my choice of ethnography as a research perspective and methodology, before providing further details on the research site and participants. In the final sections, I address the specific methods used and the precise nature of the data, before turning to an overview of the analytical approach adopted, and the ethical considerations of the project.

Before I begin this discussion, I remind my reader of the research questions that guide this study, and which were first introduced in Chapter 1. The overarching question that this thesis seeks to understand is how disenfranchised young people in an NGO in Delhi come to invest in English as a means of (assumed) social mobility. To do this, I address several sub-questions that contribute to the wider argument:

- What counts as ‘English’ for those in the NGO?
- How is English constructed as a ‘powerful’ language, for what, and for whom?
- What discourses, logics and circumstances are these discourses about English enabled and framed by?
- What do students consider themselves to gain through the process of becoming English speakers? What does it mean, for these students, to be an ‘English speaker’ in Modern India?

4.2 Research underpinnings
The design of this project has undergone deep-rooted changes since it was first formulated. The project began as a qualitative enquiry that would draw
uniquely on interviews and developed into the project it finally became: a
critical sociolinguistic ethnography. Such changes have developed in tandem
with a shifting in my own epistemological and ontological assumptions. This
study takes the stance that ethnography is not solely a method but a process,
or, as Blommaert and Jie uphold, a “perspective” (2010:5) – that is, it is a
fundamental positioning which does not begin and end with data collection
but rather shapes what I conceptualise and understand to be knowable. As
detailed in the previous chapter, this study takes a poststructural realist
stance, which requires an approach to the generation of data that allows this
to be observed, one that allows us to understand how people interact with
discourses and how they make sense of their own behaviour, choices, and
those of others, and how such behaviour and discourses become sedimented
into structural and material constraints over time. It is here that an
ethnographic approach can prove fruitful.

4.2.1 Why ethnography?
An ethnographic approach, as “thick description” (Geertz 1973) or “mapping
out [of] the landscape” (Heller 2011:45), allows for deep contextualisation with
an “emic orientation” (Canagarajah 2006:155), and for the documentation of
processes in situ and in the making, thus shedding light on the processual
nature of social structure. The role of the ethnographer is not to ‘uncover’, but
rather to be “a noticer of important and interesting things, a producer of an
account of them, and an interlocutor with other stakeholders about them”
(Heller 2011:11). Crucially, it should not be forgotten that a ‘deep insight’ into
the research site does not mean an objective presentation. Heller et al. outline
two main assumptions in this respect, the first being that “data is not “out
there” waiting to be sampled” (2017:74). With such an assumption, the role of
the researcher is highlighted as we “take an active part in constructing, or
generating it: deciding what counts as data, deciding how to analyze it, and
deciding how to present it” (ibid). In other words, ethnographic research can
only ever be represented through the lens of the researcher, which requires
acute awareness of our involvement in the process and how we ourselves are
enmeshed in relations of power in the field (I return to this in section 4.6.2).
The second assumption is that all social phenomena is situated social practice,
and thus, in turn, data too is situated social practice: “We participate in
constructing the data within a web of relationships, with each other, with other living things, with the environment or the resources we use and value” (ibid). As such, this research accepts that that any production of knowledge is necessarily co-constructed by the researcher, who cannot escape her/his own subjectivity, positioning, life history, narrative, biases, conditions, circumstances and so forth (Heller 2011).

Ethnography allows for the telling of a ‘story’. This is not a case of speaking for someone else, but rather, a telling of “our own story of some slice of experience, a story which illuminates social processes and generates explanations for why people do and think the things they do” (Heller 2008:250). The particular challenge of ethnography, for Heller, is “to capture both the ways in which things unfold in real time, and the ways in which they sediment into constraints that go far beyond the time and place of specific interactions” (2011:40). Drawing on Giddens, Heller notes that this is not a case of linking the macro and the micro – indeed, for Giddens this dichotomy is flawed – but “rather, there are observable processes that tie local forms of social action into durable, institutionalized frames that constrain what can happen along chains or flows of interactions” (ibid), or what Giddens refers to as the process of structuration. For Giddens, it is precisely to the day-to-day life practices that one must pay attention in understanding how institutionalised practices are reproduced (2013 [1984]), which echoes in many ways with Bourdieu’s concept of Habitus. Indeed, in his paper, Bourdieu the Ethnographer, Blommaert highlights:

Habituated, ‘normal’ patterns of behaviour are the switchboard through which such larger patterns can be converted in practices that are being perceived as ‘good’, ‘regular’, ‘normative’, and so on. Institutional rules are converted into institutional routines, and such routines (habitually – i.e., related to the habitus) organize behaviour, experience and practices.

(Blommaert 2005b:229).

Given the depth of understanding of social practices, social structure, and local meaning-making required to answer my research questions, I have opted for an ethnographic approach. This approach, furthermore, is further informed by notions of critical ethnography. In his overview of the development of ‘critical ethnography’ May writes of the “specific concern to
combine a critical conception of social and cultural reproduction with the study of particular organisational or social settings” (1997: 197) that gave rise to the term. In this sense, then, one can consider a critical ethnographer as having explicit interests in examining patterns of injustice: “He or she looks for patterns of social domination, hierarchy and social privilege. He or she examines the power that holds patterns in place, how people accept or struggle against them” (Agar 1996: 27). In Bourdieu’s terms, an emphasis on critical ethnography requires a focus on inequality and the spaces where such inequality is reproduced, a focus on the material conditions that lead to such inequality, and a critical investigation of our own lenses and positionality through which we research (and reproduce) inequality (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1994).

In a critical study, the “important and interesting things” that Heller encourages us to notice are the processes of “categorization, selection, and legitimization” (2011: 39) that disadvantage certain groups, of which traces can be found in, and reinforced or contested through, the discourse of participants in their socially situated space. As Heller argues, the power of ethnography lies in its ability to explore the engagement between agency and structure under certain conditions (2011: 10). With regard to her own critical ethnographic work on post-nationalism in francophone North America, she describes her approach thus:

I am concerned, then, about understanding how the trajectories of resources and actors intersect (or not), in the spaces where the consequential work of combining meaning-making with resource distribution takes place, with further structuring consequences in terms of how constraints are reproduced or changed, and hence in terms of the obstacles and opportunities social actors encounter (Heller 2011:10)

It is precisely this interest in unpacking the social processes and conditions that perpetuate and reinforce social inequality that allows me to claim this study as critical ethnography. I therefore include the term to draw attention, explicitly, to this particular focus.
4.3 Research site

4.4.1 The NGO

The research site (NGO henceforth) is a non-governmental, educational charity with close to 100 centres across Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. The NGO offers a year of free, intensive daily classes of 1 hour 45 minutes in English, non-cognitive skills, personality development, and critical thinking. Upon completing the course, the students sit internal exams in speaking, reading, writing, listening, keyboarding (typing) and discussion, and receive a certificate indicating the level they have achieved according to the CEFR framework, with B1 being both the aim and the maximum level obtainable from the course. The courses last for one year and are targeted at disadvantaged students over the age of 15, although there are no explicit criteria that students have to meet (i.e., the students are not means-tested nor is there any caste-based quota system): the general agreement, as I observed in a teacher training session, is to admit anyone who wants to join, provided they have basic literacy in English, as the NGO is not currently equipped to teach this.

The NGO is a non-profit organisation, run by an expatriate Indian philanthropist who lives and works in the US. Through informal conversations with the CEO and other academics involved in the NGO, I learnt that this project is part of a wider initiative on his part to alleviate poverty in Delhi. Initially, his focus was on ‘soup-kitchens’ to provide food for those in positions of extreme poverty but, as was relayed to me, he soon came to the realisation that, while such poverty is indeed widespread across the capital region, the more pressing issue for him was the wide-scale underemployment and lack of access to opportunity for youth in Delhi. He thus turned his attention to English and skills education, believing this to be the most effective way to assist disadvantaged youth. This is echoed in the rhetoric of the NGO, which presents itself to students as assisting them on their venture towards professional jobs. Interestingly, at the time of writing this thesis, I noticed that the NGO had dropped the term ‘English’ from their slogan, replacing it with ‘Employability’. This replacement demonstrates how

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5 In 2020, after my fieldwork, this process was changed and students are no longer examined at the end of the course as management have sought to reduce student anxiety.
English is associated with employment (they are almost interchangeable) but equally this shifting emphasis is evidence of an attempt to frame their endeavour not as language teaching but specifically as a means for jobs. I return to these ideas in more detail in later chapters.

This organisation as a research site particularly appealed to me. I had initially planned to conduct my research at the school in which I worked in Gujarat (2012-2016). As a private English-medium school which had recently begun admitting below-poverty-line students on scholarships as part of the government’s Right to Education Act (2009), I perceived this to be a fruitful place to study the experiences of ‘disadvantaged’ students who had been given access to spaces previously denied (primarily for economic reasons) to them and their families. However, these students were very young (starting Kindergarten in 2010), and I was concerned that it would be difficult to engage in conversations with them. I began to consider other sites and, as explained in Chapter 1, found this NGO through a representative who contacted my supervisor. From my first site visit in April 2018, where I was able to interact with students and hear about their backgrounds, I immediately felt that this would be a much more insightful place for me to observe the complex interrelation of English and social stratification.

I include this information not only through a desire to trace my research trajectory in a transparent way, but also to draw attention to how my own positioning by those associated to the NGO – that is, as a Western (British) researcher – was a vital part in gaining access to the field. In his ethnography of schools in China, Pérez-Milans draws attention to how his categorisation as a Western researcher was “central” in negotiating access:

… this category was capitalized in the fieldwork as a resource for the cultural benefit of the three school communities, so that the presence of a Westerner among them was taken as an opportunity for teachers and students to learn international languages and cultures (2011:183)

This categorisation was particularly salient in my own research, and was also evident in the active recruitment by the NGO of American and British researchers (although there are Indian researchers involved in the project too). Such engagement with Western academics was, presumably, one of the
reasons why the curriculum aligns itself heavily with the latest research in ELT (with an explicit emphasis on, for example, communicative approaches) and the CEFR. Furthermore, while the leaders of the NGO were not always fully sure of how the ethnographic fieldwork I was carrying out could be useful – I was asked on various occasions if I would be conducting any statistical analyses – they framed my entering of the space as one that was productive for them in terms of English Language Teaching. As in Pérez-Milans’ case, I was seen as a language resource and, as such, was asked multiple times (by leaders, students and teachers) to give feedback on language and teaching. Indeed, following the first site visit, I received an email from an academic closely aligned with the NGO, who stated that he believed whichever branch I chose to work with would benefit hugely, solely from my long-term presence on their site. While it was not my intention to evaluate or provide feedback on teaching and learning, I was nevertheless uncomfortable turning down requests for ‘help’ in the classroom and found myself offering suggestions when asked. Such a categorisation was indicative of both native speaker ideologies and of the coloniality of knowledge production that academia perpetuates, in which western (British), white researchers are constructed as having valuable knowledge, particularly here with regard to the English language, and was a foreshadowing of how I would be positioned by my participants throughout the research.

4.3.2 The branch

When I spent a week in Delhi for a site-visit in April 2018, I visited several branches and, noticing that many ran two classes simultaneously in one room, I sought upon my return in October 2018 to find a branch which a) held only one class at a time so that recordings would not be affected by noise from the other class and b) was (safely) accessible via public transport from my hostel. I was given several suggestions from head office, and chose a branch in South Delhi, close to the state border, which matched my preferences. As description of the branch, I provide below a vignette, adapted from field notes (12th November 2018):

_In the walk from the metro it feels more like a small town than Delhi. The streets, flanked by open gutters and filled with numerous potholes, are dusty._
Crisp packets, wrappers and papers lay on the ground, swept neatly on certain days into piles to burn. Dogs and cows sleep in the sun at the side of the streets, which, in the market, have shops and restaurants on both sides: clothing (no international brands, half the price of the market near my hostel), fast food – Indian and some Chinese – chai for 7 rupees (around 7p), pharmacies, hair salons with photos of Miley Cyrus and other happy white models, all bleached by the sun and barely visible. On several lampposts that line the street towards the centre, red and white posters with a smiling ‘modern’-looking, attractive young woman (whether she is Indian or white I cannot tell) in a white shirt and wearing a headset advertises ‘British English’ classes – these are not the NGO posters, but appear to be for a paid coaching institute, and clearly index both the assumed career path (call centres) and affective result (smiling, happiness) of being a ‘British English’ speaker. Above the shops hang saris and other clothes drying on strings attached to the windows of the flats above, some up to 3 floors high. Posters adorn the walls of houses and shops: tiffin services, rooms for rent, exam tuition and coaching institutes. Some are in Hindi, others in English. Most of the English posters contain various misspellings (“low rant [rent]”). The branch is down a quieter side street where vegetable sellers can manoeuvre their wooden carts with more ease, and where the beeping of scooters is less audible. Opposite the centre is a print shop (the type where one cannot enter, only ask over the counter) and a tailor. Beside, there is a vacant garage, and some sort of metalwork space. The NGO sign is barely visible, and someone has pasted a rent advert across it. The entrance - a heavy metal door - is down an alleyway (it took me 15 minutes to locate it on the first day) and reached by 10 concrete steps, taking us underground. This, plus the bare, concrete floor, keeps the temperature bearable. A huge water pipe runs across the upper part of the wall opposite the entrance – it is the first thing you see on opening the door – and has been decorated with drawings of smiley faces and reminders: ‘Please don’t use Hindi’, ‘Please speak in full sentence’. The room is probably 20 strides across, both ways, and partitioned with a wooden frame that separates the computer room from the classroom. The wooden partition has no door (just a frame), and does not reach the ceiling; there is no protection from sound. This branch is lucky to have only one session running at a time, unlike the vast majority of the other branches. Books are kept in neat piles on various bookshelves, and each wall is dedicated to a particular class
group, where posters and essays are pinned to boards. It is clear that the space belongs to the students, and they move about freely as if to demonstrate this. They feel comfortable coming early to sit and read or use the computers, and they keep it tidy; they respect the space. Motivational posters are everywhere; near the clock, a painting of birds in mid-flight hints at the notion of freedom that imbibes the spirit here. Colours are abundant and brighten the white walls. A layer of dust coats the room, despite the daily cleaning by the maid – also a student here. The laptops – 20 in total, for which a strict logbook is kept daily – have individual cloth covers to protect them from the dust. Reports came from another branch last week that the laptops had all been stolen in the night.

Figure 4.1: Poster for another coaching company advertising ‘British’ English classes in the street outside the NGO
This vignette is not only a comment on my impressions of the local area in which the NGO was located but is important too in understanding the particular sociology of Delhi, and the relevance of this for these students’ experiences. The billboards and posters pasted across nearly every spare piece of wall advertised ‘tiffin’ (packed lunch or dinner) services or guest houses for the numerous students in the area who had relocated from areas outside Delhi to attend one of the many (also widely advertised) paid coaching institutes that train students for highly competitive exams such as the JEE (Joint Entrance Examination for engineering colleges) and IAS (Indian Administrative Service) exams. The area thus brims with reminders of possibility – of the potential to find ways to secure oneself a more stable life.
But the existence of multiple coaching centres also reveals just how difficult this dream is for students who find themselves working endlessly to pass extremely challenging exams as they compete against thousands of others for very few places. For the students in the NGO, such exams were far out of their reach, not only because of their English competency, but also because of the costs of coaching.

Education, however, is not the only reason for the huge migration into Delhi from other states. As the capital city, with a booming tourist trade, growing industries and a constant need for labour, Delhi attracts one of the highest numbers of intra-national migration, second only to Maharashtra, the state in which Mumbai is located (Census of India 2001). While the vast majority of the NGO students were born and raised in Delhi, their parents or grandparents had migrated there from other states, notably Uttar Pradesh. Migration has certainly been common throughout the country and throughout its history, but there is a particular ‘promise’ to areas such as Delhi, as those seeking work, training and education flock from the smaller cities, surrounding villages, or less prosperous states in the hope of improving their lives and futures. For the students in the NGO, this promise is seen in the posters that purport to guarantee success in exams, as well as in the luxurious, affluent and trendy areas inhabited by the Delhi elite and foreign ex-patriates – such as the area that I chose to stay in – just a few metro stops away. But, while the city “represents the promise of freedom and opportunity” in “the modern imaginary”, the deep layers of inequality and exclusion across Delhi are stark (Heller, Mukhopadhyay, Banda, & Sheikh 2015:1) as massive wealth stands side by side with extreme poverty, and all that is in between. The sociology of Delhi is thus important to consider for this study – that is, how it not only is an area that holds, for many, a promise of upward mobility, but also is a clear example of deeply intertwined unequal social and material conditions.

4.3.3 Participants

- The students
Most of the students came from the same sub-caste, one that represents the vast majority of the population of the area around the branch. I have chosen
not to disclose the name of the caste, as they are heavily concentrated in one particular area of Delhi – where my branch was located – and revealing this would make the branch potentially identifiable to those familiar with Delhi. I understand that this has scholarly implications, as my writing on this caste cannot be cross-referenced if it is kept anonymous, but this is a sacrifice that I am willing to make in the interest of protecting my participants’ anonymity.

With regard to the positioning of the caste, there is great disagreement over which varna (the four main caste subdivisions) they belong to, with some claims that they descend from the Kshatriyas (second ‘highest’ caste) and other arguments that they are from the Vaishyas (the ‘third’). While their ancestral descent may be disputed, in Delhi this caste group have been labelled as OBC (Other Backward Classes) by the government as the caste is deemed socially, economically and educationally ‘backward’. Interestingly, this classification is not ubiquitous across India. In some states, this caste has been allocated ‘Scheduled Caste’ (SC) status by the government, a status reserved for the most oppressed peoples, usually those from the Dalit communities. Parallel to this, in 2008, there was civil unrest in another state of Northern India as this caste group rallied to be re-classified from OBC to SC, which would grant them further quotas for government jobs.

While they may not be the most socially oppressed caste, there are widespread negative stereotypes in circulation of them as thuggish, uneducated and uncouth. There was a rumour circulating in the branch while I was there that Dominos no longer delivered pizza to that area as the delivery boys were too afraid. Although a facilitator informed me that this was not the case (Dominos were allegedly refusing to deliver as the road names were not marked clearly and they struggled to find addresses and deliver in the 30-minute timeframe that was promised by the pizza chain), the rumour was a clear indication of the types of assumptions made about this caste group (both by members and non-members). A Google search of the caste brings up links to a question posted in a forum asking why this caste is so feared in Delhi. Most of the responses chastised the caste members for being unintelligent and only capable of responding to issues with violence, but one member of this caste took this as an opportunity to attempt to quell such stereotypes:
1. The people I meet gets (sic.) shocked when they come to know that I am a [caste name]. They have a stereotype that all of [caste name] are rude and can’t speak English (not at all true).

2. People say, “you don’t look like a [caste name]”, because they expect a well built body and less etiquettes

In doing so, this person brings attention to (and tries to contest) discourses that frame this caste group as uneducated, uncouth, and unable to speak English, as well as how they are assumed to be physically identifiable through their body shape and bodily behaviour: “a well built body and less etiquettes”. Such stereotypes and social types were certainly familiar to my participants, whether they were members of the caste or not. For some members, however, this caste imaginary becomes performative, and is a source of pride, as certain members respond to their stigmatisation through “bravado” rather than “cowering” (Goffman 1986:29). I saw several cars in the area, for example, proudly displaying their caste name on the rear window with a silhouetted image of a burly man holding a baseball bat alongside the words ‘last warning’ – the implication being that these are not people to be messed with.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, the caste system is complicated, political, and it exists alongside – or rather, enmeshed within – a class system. And yet, the two do not necessarily match up. One facilitator from my branch, Rupal, was from the ‘highest’ caste (Brahmin), but grew up below the poverty line in very unstable housing, and her older sisters had had to leave education early to find work and support her schooling (she is the only one in her family who speaks English, has completed school to 12th grade, and has attended higher education). Furthermore, while the dominant caste in the NGO is one with much social stigma, as a traditionally agricultural group, in modern capitalist India some have been able to accrue wealth by becoming landlords. From an economic class perspective, there has been some mobility, with some of them now owning property. Their caste, however, and even their ability to perform other aspects of middle-classness beyond the economic, often places them at a different social ranking.

Beyond issues of caste and class, there was some internal heterogeneity among the students, notably in terms of educational background of the students (primary level to postgraduate; Hindi medium/English medium,
although all had come from government schools), parental educational background (illiterate to postgraduate), parental occupation (farmer, business owner, rickshaw driver etc.), and student occupation (university or school student, housewife, maid, pharmacist etc.). There was an almost equal number of male and female students, although some classes during the day were uniquely attended by women (predominantly housewives who attended once they had sent the children to school and before they had to return for cooking and housework in the afternoon), and by men in the later evening sessions (many women did not feel safe walking to and from the branch in the dark). With regard to religion, most students were Hindu, with a very small percentage of Muslims, and no other religions that I was aware of. Thus, while the students represent a relatively ‘disadvantaged’ stratum of society, the internal heterogeneity within the student group allows for further nuanced analysis according to the diverse backgrounds of each student. Thus, I ensured that students selected for interview had different backgrounds, notably in terms of gender, religion, occupation and past education, in order to see how the complex web of social stratification played a part in their navigation of the English language. I provide more detail on the individual students selected for interview in the data analysis chapters.

**The teachers**

Referred to as ‘facilitators’ (indicative of the influence of Western ELT pedagogy), each teacher was responsible for a particular ‘shift’ in each branch, teaching either four morning/afternoon or four afternoon/evening sessions, from Monday-Saturday, with a short overlap in between shifts for teachers to carry out administrative work together and discuss any issues, such as recruitment for new sessions. The two facilitators I worked alongside were both graduates of the NGO and had been recruited and trained by the NGO shortly after graduating (the NGO provides all training for facilitators, and any student who has graduated with the highest level and who already holds a bachelor’s degree is eligible to apply to become a facilitator – no external teaching qualifications or experience were required, although this has since been reviewed). Both had attended Hindi-medium education prior to joining the NGO as students and were now highly competent English speakers. Both in their twenties, this was their first ‘proper’ job, although neither of them
planned at the time to remain at the NGO for their entire careers. The male facilitator, Amir, a Muslim man in his mid-twenties, had completed his undergraduate degree in Political Science at a university in Delhi, and the female facilitator, Rupal, was in the process of completing her Bachelor’s in Education. While Amir had ambitious plans of finding a scholarship to fund a Master’s in Europe, Rupal was relatively unsure of her career plans, saying that it depended for the most part on her husband’s family. She was not yet married, but she was acutely aware that this would be happening soon, and, as such, it was hard for her to make plans without knowing how lenient her future husband and in-laws would be. In addition to the two facilitators, at a training session I observed at head office, I met another young Muslim man, Abdul, who had recently graduated from another branch and was volunteering at the NGO in the hopes of being employed as a facilitator.

Over the three-month period I became quite close with the students, although this remained a student-teacher relationship, with the students referring to me as ‘Ma’am’ and greeting me respectfully when they arrived and left, much like they did with the facilitators. With Amir and Rupal, however, I struck up a friendship, as we shared lunches together, and, over time, began to share aspects of our personal lives. While I saw him less frequently, I also grew close to Abdul, as he was keen to know more about my research. It became clear to me that he was intensely frustrated with what he perceived as gross injustices in his society and, as such, he became very interested in the objectives of my research, offering at times insightful metacommentary of his own experiences. Amir and Rupal, albeit less stingingly, also offered sophisticated accounts of inequality and oppression in modern day India. My relationship with all three, in particular with Amir and Abdul, continues today, as we remain in regular contact over social media. All three of them became key participants for the project – their personal trajectories will be considered in more detail in later chapters.

4.3.4 Beyond the NGO
While the NGO, and one branch in particular, was the main research site for the study, I feel it important to further clarify my intentions: while the discourses enacted by and enabled within the NGO are the object of study, it is not the only the NGO that I am interested in. Rather, I am interested in how
the NGO and its members draw on, invest in and reproduce certain discourses that are part of the wider social setting. This meant turning the ethnographic ‘gaze’ to places and people beyond the NGO, and ensuring “observation at various levels, different times and places” (Blommaert & Jie 2010:34). This allowed me to not only observe daily activities in order to “derive their meaning and rationality as situated in the local context” but equally to place “a focus on how participants’ actions at particular moments and in particular spaces are connected and constrained by other interactions across space and time” (Pérez-Milans 2016:85).

What this means, concretely, is that the data generated for the project comes from within the NGO and from wider settings across Delhi. Besides the scheduled attendance at the NGO and the activities carried out there, as an ethnographer, I was never fully ‘off’. Taking public transport, drinking wine in up-market bars in Hauz Khas Village, having casual conversations with the staff and clients of the hostel that became my home for three months – all of these moments were not simply context to the main study, but rather important data in and of themselves. I was struck by the impression of straddling two lives: one at the NGO, where these students, as English speakers, were in the minority in their wider lives, where money was a concrete and overbearing worry, where lunches of chapatti and sabzi were made by mothers and packed in tiffins, where my daily chai and snack break cost me less than 30p, and where all things Western were simultaneously viewed as suspicious but tantalising; and my life at the Swedish-style hostel, with a host of international and local clients, Nutella waffles for breakfast and beer in the evening, coffee that cost 250 rupees (£2.50), where cultural capital depended on stamps in passports, where English was the de facto lingua franca, aside from the ten or so Hindi phrases that tourists learnt out of curiosity. This too, was data, as was my own navigation of the two spaces. Over time, as I became friends with the staff at the hostel, I decided to also interview them. As with the NGO participants, more detail will be provided on individuals in the data analysis chapters.
4.4 Data generation

As previously mentioned, I understand ethnography not as ‘method’ but rather as a perspective. This point notwithstanding, there were several important methodical tools that I implemented to generate my data, each of which were part of three overarching activities typical of ethnographic fieldwork: Observing (finding out what people do), eliciting (finding out what accounts people provide) and collecting material traces (articles, documents, posters) (Heller et al. 2017:77).

4.4.1 Participant observation

The bulk of my data comes from field notes taken from participant observation in the NGO and beyond. As a “hallmark technique” of ethnography (Heller 2008:257), participant observation is not an attempt at achieving a ‘fly on the wall’ account, but rather takes into account that the practices observed are fundamentally influenced by our presence. This was especially obvious to me in the ways in which I was frequently called upon by the facilitators, and at times the students, to answer questions about the English language. My presence (my Britishness?) was constantly felt, and I was often positioned as the arbiter of the language (I expand on this in Chapter 5). At the same time, prolonged observation does allow, after a certain amount of time, for a less ‘intrusive’ presence on behalf of the researcher – I noticed how, if I entered the NGO mid-class towards the end of my stay, the students no longer stopped listening to the teacher to ask me questions (although they continued to say a polite ‘good morning Ma’am’). With regard to the recording of sessions, I was hesitant at first to record – despite having gained permission – as I was conscious of the perception held by students and teachers that the purpose of my visit was to assess or evaluate their language. I decided to wait until they were more comfortable before recording class sessions, not through a desire to obtain more ‘authentic’ data, but rather as an attempt to reduce students’ potential anxiety and discomfort.

I visited the NGO for observation for several hours (usually the length of 3 classes) each day from Monday-Friday and occasionally on Saturdays, from October 2018 to early January 2019. I decided early on to focus on the morning sessions, occasionally staying for some afternoon sessions, as I was
conscious of my own safety when walking and taking the metro in the dark. On the days I did not attend the NGO, I visited the head office to observe several facilitator training sessions, and to meet with the curriculum creators, management, senior trainers, and those in charge of monitoring ‘drop-outs’, student recruitment or graduation. While I spoke to management and senior trainers on several occasions informally, I did not conduct interviews with them as my main interest was in the students’ experience. However, as I have already highlighted in a previous section, the division between ‘on’ and ‘off’ time in terms of data generation was not clear-cut. My field notes testify to this blurred nature of ethnographic fieldwork, as they contain detailed accounts of events unrelated to the NGO that I attended, informal discussions I was involved in, posters in metro stations, snippets of overheard conversations, TV shows, dinners with stakeholders of the NGO, pizzas with friends, trips to the cinema, taxi rides, visits to the police station to sort visa complications, evenings in bars – in sum, the ‘important things’ I noticed during the entirety of my stay in Delhi that shed light on the wider context of the NGO and its students and staff.

4.4.2 Semi-structured interviews
I referred at the beginning of this chapter to the overhaul in the design of this project since I embarked upon it. I initially begin with a critique of the attitudinal surveys of English in India, arguing that such an approach did not allow for an in-depth understanding of the reasons why attitudes may or not be changing, and for whom. I opted, therefore, for a qualitative enquiry based on interviews. However, as I delved further into my methodological reading, I began to take the view that interviews alone could not provide me with what I sought, as it would not allow me to fully observe the ways that discourses or ideologies are enacted and reproduced in the wider social setting. As Gal and Irvine have argued, ideologies and discourses are not always explicitly stated, and thus “we cannot limit our analysis to actors’ explicit assertions as if nothing else much mattered. In fact, we cannot even limit ourselves to linguistic utterances” (2019:177). This, of course, does not mean that interviews are not an important or useful method, but rather that one must be aware of what one can and cannot expect to obtain from an interview (Briggs 1986; Heller 2008). As Briggs argues, interviews must not be understood as “a
reflection of what is ‘out there’” but rather “as an interpretation which is jointly produced by interviewer and respondent” (1986:3) and structured by presupposed meta-communicative norms, aspects which must be taken into consideration for the analysis.

For Heller, interviews can be particularly illuminating in “getting a sense of participants’ life trajectories and social positioning”, which “can help explain the interests they have in doing things certain ways” (2008:257). Furthermore, and relevant to the data for this study, interviews can also allow the researcher to juxtapose what people say with what they do, i.e. their practice, and thus can allow for “ways of discovering coherences and contradictions and how people strategize around them” (ibid). As such, interviews were a key method mobilised in this project. Following Heller’s (2008) advice, I began the interviews after I had spent a few weeks at the NGO so that the students felt more comfortable with my presence, and so that I had a better understanding of the context, that is, “a sense of what things mean to participants” (Heller 2008:256). I had prepared in advance a list of topics to discuss with participants (see appendix 8), but I allowed the conversations to flow in the various directions that they took, as I was keen for participants to share with me the stories that they found relevant to the discussion, and we often departed from the script. I was also keen to avoid broaching the topic of caste directly myself, both because of its taboo nature, and because I was wary of positing caste as an issue where it was not. I thus opted to ask participants to tell me about their ‘community’, which allowed them to interpret this in a way that was salient to them – for some, they spoke of their religion, for others they spoke of their ancestral homeland (another Indian state), but for many this was interpreted as caste.

I had planned for the interviews to take place in an empty room next door to the centre, which the landlord had given us permission to use. However, as I walked out to conduct my first interview with Mohit, a student in his early 20s, Rupal, the facilitator came hurrying after me to suggest that it may not be a good idea after all for me to interview him in an empty room alone. She was not concerned about his behaviour, but rather she worried that the neighbours would ‘gossip’. I thus elected to carry out interviews with men outside the centre in the alleyway (and, of course, I ensured that my participants were happy to conduct the interview in a relatively open space,
reminding them we could pause or stop whenever they felt necessary). Shortly after, I had to begin the interviews with women in the alleyway too, as I noticed that a nest of (what I think were) Asian Giant Hornets had appeared in the corner of the empty room. Recording interviews in the alleyway certainly had disadvantages – the sound of the bull in the small cowshed behind us, the scooters in the road 10 metres away, and the water pipe above my head that burst one morning, covering me, my dictaphone and my laptop with dirty water (we all survived!). These inconveniences notwithstanding, conducting the interviews outside also provided certain interesting moments. As students often came in and out of the NGO door to use the outside bathroom which was located a few metres from where we sat, I was able to see at which moments my participants chose to speak quietly in case they were overheard, or at which moments they spoke loudly and proudly held the gaze of a passer-by. We also attracted a lot of interest from children who lived in the flats above the centre, whose curiosity (often directed towards me, visibly a foreigner, or towards the English we were speaking) led to interesting discussions following one of my interviews with Rupal. Ideally, I would have liked a quiet space to interview my participants, but this was logistically impossible. I had considered at the beginning of my fieldwork visiting the houses of students, but after much reflection, I decided that it could potentially cause friction. I would not have had the time to visit the house of every student and, given the tendency in India to be very welcoming to guests (which I had experienced in my time living in Gujarat), I predicted that if I had visited the house of one student, I would have received invitations from many more, and it would have been very impolite to turn them down.

The length and number of interviews varied depending on the participant (some were more ‘chatty’ than others), the time they had to spare and, presumably, how comfortable they felt around me. This meant that the facilitators spoke much longer and more often with me as I had the impression that some students felt too shy to elaborate, and perceived me as a ‘teacher’-like figure of authority (although some were keen to talk for a long time). Interviews were held in English, although I had given my participants the option to speak in Hindi if they felt more comfortable. Only one student did, only for certain sentences that she struggled to frame in English, and that too after much prompting from her peer who I had chosen to interview at the
same time (I expand on this moment in Chapter 6). An account of each recording and participant is detailed in appendix 2.

4.4.3 Workshops
While the NGO syllabus, and the informal discussions at the beginning of classes, allowed me to gain a glimpse into how students felt about English as a language, there was very little – if any – discussion on what the students actually imagined ‘good English’ to be. Originally, I had planned to access this through a focus group discussion, but it proved extremely difficult to find a time when several students were free, and I did not want to interrupt them too often from their classes. After gaining permission from head office, I was allowed to hold two ‘workshops’ during class time, in which I provided the students with a series of discussion points on the topic of ‘good English’. This was complemented by a series of videos that I showed them of various Indians speaking various types of Englishes. The purpose of the group discussion was to elicit debate, to see how the students agreed with or contested one another. This took place towards the end of my stay as it took a while to get permission and choose a date that suited the facilitator’s plans, but the timing proved interesting as it allowed me to compare the responses of students who I had already interviewed before the workshop with those in the follow-up interview after the session. Some students had begun to think differently about varieties of English; some remained committed to the idea of a proper standard, usually ‘British’ or ‘American’. Of course, it had not been my intention to use this as ‘intervention’ session or to ‘teach’ them about sociolinguistics; I said very little and acted as a facilitator. Nevertheless, the discussion brought to the surface various contradictions and tensions, which clearly had a marked impact on some students, and less so on others.

4.4.4 Collection of semiotic material
Finally, much of my data comes from ‘material traces’ in the form of posters, leaflets, promotional material for the NGO, the curriculum, teacher guidebooks, rule-books, student workbooks, the NGO website, Facebook conversations and student’s work. Most of this was collected in the way of photographs, rather than taking original documents as I was limited in what
I could physically carry home to the UK. Such material has provided me with a way of elaborating on my observational and interview data (Heller et al. 2017). That is, they have been a useful way of contrasting how the NGO seeks to frame itself and its students with the practices and beliefs of the students themselves, and the potential tensions and contradictions between these. In Chapter 7 in particular, an analysis of textual data from the syllabus and websites allows me to demonstrate the neoliberalisation of education taking place within the NGO, and then to examine this further from a practice perspective through the analysis of classroom interaction and the ‘uptake’ and contestation of neoliberal ideologies by the students. An examination of the posters drawn by students and created by the NGO allows for an inquiry into the entextualisation of certain ways of talking about success and social mobility, and looking at student’s workbooks allowed for an examination of the circulation of texts, of the layers of additional notes and corrections (Heller et al. 2017). NGO artefacts equally proved useful in prompting discussion in interviews – I was able to ask students why certain posters had been made, why certain rules were made hyper-visible on the walls, and thus engage in conversations that allowed me to delve into the underlying ideologies that I map out in the data analysis chapters, such as what counts as language, as language learning, or as being a good ‘English speaker’. Finally, social media conversations (predominantly with Abdul and Amir) after the in-situ fieldwork had ended allowed me to not only keep in touch, but also learn about their trajectories upon completion of the NGO (or promotions, in the case of some of the facilitators), as well as allowing me to check my interpretations of certain interactions or interviews with the participants themselves. Tables representing the totality of the data generated from the fieldwork, as well as a timeline for the interviews and recordings can be found in appendices 1&2.

4.5 Data analysis

While acknowledging the fact that data analysis is a “rhizomatic and recursive” (Heller et al. 2017:103) process that cannot be contained into neat boxes, I will briefly map out here the strategies for analysis that were mobilized in the production of this thesis, that is, mapping, tracing, connecting and claiming (ibid). In a first instance, I ‘mapped’ my data, organizing it into
salient categories or themes that were connected to the research interest and questions. For this descriptive stage, I had to transcribe the audio data, and ultimately concluded that, while all transcription is an ethical and political issue (Ochs 1979), the transcription style best suited to this type of analysis (discourse analysis) did not require a deep layer of detail (see appendix 3 for the conventions used). Following this, I collated the transcriptions, field notes and other textual artefacts and used NVivo software to code the data and organise it systematically, in order to gain an overview of “what people are doing and saying, how those practices are temporally and spatially arranged—that is, what happens when and where—what resources are circulating” (Heller et al. 2017:122).

The second stage, tracing, required a focus on how these phenomena happen. That is, it looked at “the elaboration of trajectories or patterns of circulation of activities, people and resources” (ibid:111) and thus at the historical context of the phenomena in question. This stage allowed me to shed light on the conditions under which certain things happened (why students placed such value on ‘pure’ or ‘standard’ languages, for example), as well as on the formation of social categories such as the social type of the “English speaker”, and the (in)stability of such categories (ibid). The third stage, connecting, brings together via means of an “informed explanation” the elements made salient in the first two stages. In other words:

It formulates relationships among the categories, trajectories and circulations identified and defined earlier, in order to discover the conditions and consequences of circulation across spaces, and thereby explain what happens to people and resources under what kind of conditions and with what consequences, what kinds of transformations may happen and why (ibid:114)

It is at this stage that the social action observed in the data can be connected to wider processes, to the “bigger picture” (ibid:112) through informed interpretation that situates the phenomena within its historical and social context and within existing scholarly literature. This leads to the final stage, claiming, or the formulation of hypotheses, which ultimately allowed me to detail my arguments and contribute to wider discussions beyond the context of the data collection.
4.6 Ethical considerations

4.6.1 Ethics
This study gained ethical approval from the UCL ethics committee prior to my first site visit in April 2018 (see appendix 4). I sought to ensure the anonymity of all participants by providing pseudonyms, and by removing the name of the NGO, the particular location of the centre and the dominant caste group in the branch, as mentioning them could potentially make the branch, and therefore the students and staff, identifiable to anyone with demographic knowledge of Delhi. After gaining permission to carry out my research from the CEO of the NGO (via email and video-call conversations) and having provided the Indian government with a brief overview of my research for the purposes of gaining a research visa, I ensured that informed consent was taken from all of my participants in the branch. Participants were informed about the research through verbal explanations given in English by myself to the entire class upon my arrival so that they understood my presence and observations from the beginning, and students were encouraged to ask any questions they may have to me or the facilitator in Hindi if they did not understand. Individual interview participants also received written information sheets in English and Hindi (translated by my Hindi tutor and verified by two Hindi speakers as I am unable to read or write Hindi – see appendices 6&7). For participants under the age of 18, I also provided information sheets in Hindi for the parents and required parental signature on the consent form. Although only one of my participants was a minor (17 years old), a few of the unmarried young women suggested that they felt more comfortable taking consent from their parents despite being over 18. As such, I offered participants (male and female) over the age of 18 the option of gaining parental consent too if they wished. All students and staff who had participated directly (interviews) or indirectly (observation) were provided with my contact details (email/WhatsApp/Facebook) should they wish to contact me afterwards or withdraw from the research. With regard to data storage, all soft copies of data were stored on an encrypted USB and a password-protected laptop, which only I have access to. No identifiable personal details were stored (i.e. pseudonyms were allocated from the start), and some identifiable characteristics have been changed to protect my
participants. Hard-copy data such as field notes were kept in a padlocked locker which only I had access to for the duration of the fieldwork, then transferred to the computer, anonymised, and stored in the same way as the soft data upon my return to the UK.

4.6.2 Reflexivity
This study takes seriously the notion of reflexivity, and the need to be explicit about the researcher’s positioning. I have attempted to do this in Chapters 2 and 3 by mapping out my own scholarly journey as well as explicitly stating the underlying assumptions of this work. Reflexivity, however, is also a vital component of the fieldwork itself, and this required a constant awareness of how my own positioning – as a white, British, ‘native-speaker’ woman – would be of consequence in my interactions with students. As mentioned, it became particularly clear to me that I was positioned by my participants as a figure of authority over the English language, something that was unsurprising to me given my experience teaching English and French in Gujarat (2012-2016), where I had witnessed the same phenomenon. Of course, reflexivity does not mean seeking to change the impact of one’s body in the field, but rather it involved consistently taking it into account at all stages of the research process. I was, as stated, particularly aware of my whiteness and my Britishness, and the potential power dynamics inherent within our historical relationships. I realised, however, that I had underestimated the impact of my womanhood, and how – as I detail in Chapter 8 – the students’ reluctance to teach me vocabulary from their local dialect may have been not only because this was seen as an inappropriate language to teach a white foreigner, but also inappropriate for a woman. I had not been able to acknowledge this until a friend raised it as a comment in a data analysis session. I am therefore cognisant that, despite my commitment to reflexivity (prompted by a field journal that I kept, and by multiple online conversations in the field with my supervisor and fellow PhD students), there remain blind spots that I am yet to see. Furthermore, while I was reasonably well prepared to pre-empt the ways in which I was positioned by my participants, I had neglected to fully acknowledge how I may have been unwittingly positioning them. This became clear to me one lunchtime with Amir, the 26-year-old Muslim facilitator, as he asked me for some recommendations for shows on
Netflix. Having recently watched the series “Big Mouth” (an American comedy cartoon show which deals explicitly with issues related to sex, sexuality, masturbation, puberty and relationships), this would usually have been the show that I recommended to like-minded people of my age. Amir and I had become friends by this point, and so the professional relationship that we had begun with had transformed into something more amical. Nevertheless, I noticed that I hesitated for a second before suggesting the show. Was I simply wary of mentioning something potentially vulgar in a professional setting, or of contributing to discourses that hyper-sexualise Western women in India? Or was I making assumptions that a Muslim man would be offended by such topics? Was I possibly emasculating and infantilising him by assuming this was not an appropriate recommendation for him? Perhaps, all of the above. I suggested the show to him after a slight pause, and he immediately burst out laughing, stating he had already seen it and was a big fan. I sat with this interaction for a long while that evening, and it came back to me on many occasions, constantly reminding me to question my immediate assumptions, and to wonder how they were informed by certain hegemonic discourses that I too was responsible for reproducing.

4.6.3 Collaboration with the NGO
Upon the initial elaboration of this project, I had considered including elements of active participation, as I believed that critical research necessarily has a responsibility to advocate for the social justice causes that they shed light on (Cameron et al. 1992). That is to say, beyond ensuring that the research is ethical and therefore causes no harm to participants, many uphold that it also needs to ensure that research actively seeks to benefit the participants. I still fundamentally support this point, however, as I undertook fieldwork I became aware of the ethical, political and logistical issues of such a task. While I had originally planned a series of training workshops for the facilitators, I soon realized that I would have neither the funding nor the time off work to return to the field before the end of my PhD. This, of course, was further hampered by the COVID-19 outbreak. However, more importantly than this, as I progressed in the analysis of my data, I began to feel a deep sense of unease over the idea of running training workshops, firstly because it felt rather inappropriate (not to mention colonial) for me, as a British ‘outsider’ to
offer ‘advice’ to people who had been working in the NGO for years. Secondly, given the type of research that I have conducted, I have no concrete ‘advice’ that can be formulated into a neat step-by-step guide on a PowerPoint presentation. Finally, and most importantly, I am conscious that this thesis provides several layers of critique of some of the NGO practices, that I am wary of presenting to head office for fear of offending, upsetting or angering them. Much like for Allan, my interest did not lie in the ‘effectiveness’ of the programmes (as is the case for many of the academic projects currently being carried out at the NGO) but rather “their actual effects” (2013: 60) and, like Leighton, my aim was to interrogate a specific community and the “structures that perpetuate it, not to critique a specific set of individuals” (2020: 447). I mention on multiple occasions in this thesis that I do not intend to discredit the NGO – they are attempting to find a solution to a problem that very few others are addressing, for free, and are deeply committed to their cause, undergoing constant reassessment and readjustment. The staff are well trained (the costs are borne by the NGO), many facilities are provided, and the students appear happy and enthusiastic. I believe, truly, that they are making a big difference to some students’ lives. They also, however, do not exist in a vacuum. They exist within a political economic order that is beyond their control, and they are therefore necessarily entangled within – and at times reproducers of – discourses and ideologies that I see as being harmful. This put me in a state of anxiety for a long while over what and how to communicate with the NGO. I could not, in good conscience, do nothing at all: the NGO had graciously allowed me to be present in the branch for a long period of time, and they had paid for my first flight ticket when I did the initial site visit, and so I felt a duty to provide them with something useful. More than this, my duty is not only to the NGO as an institution, but also to my participants as individuals. I feel a deep obligation to the students and staff who had shared their worries with me, who had been open and vulnerable in their accounts of the oppression they faced. It is thus insufficient, in my perspective, for me to provide the NGO with nothing upon the completion of the research, as this would be disrespectful of the students’ experiences. However, it needs to be done carefully and diplomatically, with the (anonymous) voices of students centred in the discussion. As such, I have contacted the CEO to discuss the idea of data analysis workshops with himself or head office, with the
participation of some of my key participants (Amir and Abdul), who have gladly accepted the invitation. In this way, I intend to present the data to head office, so that they can discuss their own interpretations and analysis of the issues at hand. If needs be, I can provide them with theoretical concepts that I have used to explain my own interpretations, but fundamentally I hope for this to become a dialogue that takes place primarily between the stakeholders, and which, hopefully, will allow for a better understanding by head office of some of the issues that students face which, it is my belief, are currently overlooked or erased within the hegemonic discourses that the NGO reproduces. Due to the global pandemic and to my own financial constraints, this is a project that, unfortunately, could not take place within the confines of this PhD project, so I am currently compiling an application for a post-doctoral award that would allow me to take this forward in 2021. For now, we return to the project at hand; in the following four chapters I present the analysis of the data.
Chapter 5 – ‘Good English’: Constructing the linguistic object

5.1. Introduction

In the last month of my stay, curious to hear how the students would articulate their understanding of ‘good’ English, I conducted two workshops in which I opened with an activity asking students to work in small groups to list the ‘types’ of English that they knew. The question was intentionally vague – it could encompass varieties, registers, styles and so on – so as to allow the students to interpret it in a way that made sense to them. Quite unsurprisingly, it was met with visible confusion – furrowed brows, whispers, and questions regarding what a ‘type’ of English is. The confusion was only slightly dissipated when one student had a sudden ‘realisation’ – “Oh, you are talking about British and American!” While they were talking, a semi-argument broke out between a couple of students who couldn’t agree on whether they had learnt British or American English. Some asked their partner in a whisper if they had understood the question. One shook her head: “There is no specific type, just English”. Another disagreement broke out between those who thought ‘Indian English’ was a ‘type’, and those who didn’t – the latter being the dominant group: “I think there is no Indian English, just two famous: British and American only”. One young woman looked particularly baffled, frowning, shaking her head, and murmuring “Indian? No, no”, while another voiced the same sentiment aloud. As the conversation continued, several students seemed amused by the concept of Indian English itself – a couple began to giggle, naming countries seemingly at random and asking if they had an ‘English’ too. “French? French English? Is it there?” she asked, smirking. “Japanese!” her friend replied, as they both burst into laughter.

This interaction is a first indication of a phenomenon that I will elaborate upon in this chapter – the delegitimisation of Indian English. This was not simply a case of students being ‘unaware’ of the sociolinguistic concept of language varieties – it was a rather intensely negative reaction to the idea of ‘Indian English’, which, to some, appeared entirely absurd. It indicated an understanding of English that did not frame it as an Indian language, or the rightful ‘property’ of Indians. This did not mean that the
students didn’t recognize that their ways of speaking were noticeably different from, say, mine (they often noted how I pronounced things differently). Rather, it was a refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of Indian forms of English.

The workshop interactions raise some of the key themes of this chapter. Contrary to the celebratory (Tupas & Rubdy 2015) claims of the decolonisation and re-appropriation of English in India, as a British woman, I was frequently positioned as the arbiter of the language, and Indian English was framed as deficient, or, indeed, was not considered a legitimate ‘thing’ at all. In what follows, I seek to demonstrate firstly how students negotiate their relationality to the language and their positionality in a larger national and transnational, stratified, imagined community of English speakers, arguing that their ability to see themselves as legitimate speakers of English is constrained by their own sense of nation, race, class and caste. I then explore how they construct the linguistic object of ‘English’ (as well as other languages) as a bounded entity premised on a binary of correct/incorrect that instils within the students a corrective habitus and encourages them to see their English language practices as in constant need of improvement. Finally, I address what I interpret as discursive struggles, or attempts to refute these dominant discourses, arguing that they are ultimately unsuccessful, built – inadvertently – as they are on the same logics that delegitimise certain language practices – and speakers – to begin with.

5.2 Legitimising English

Before seeing what English means to my participants in a symbolic sense in the following chapter (that is, how they perceive English to be a means to achieve mobility, or other types of ‘returns’), we need firstly to map out what ‘English’ means to them, in terms of the linguistic object(s) that they attach to this signifier. This is crucial to address in the first instance as, in order for English to hold capital it must be constructed and recognized as an object. In the words of Foucault, discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972:49, my emphasis). English – and its various ‘varieties’ – can thus only have symbolic meaning attached to them when they are discursively constructed (and thus identified) as things (Henry 2015). I
follow Henry in his discussion of “Chinglish” by understanding Indian English not as a variety but as a shifting signifier. That is, not as “established variants” but rather terms that can be attached to a range of forms (ibid:96). As such, while it is not my aim to ‘define’ English (or indeed, Indian English), this section seeks to map the ways in which participants understand what counts or does not count as ‘English’ – or rather, ‘good English’.

5.2.1 The illegitimacy of Indian English(es)

One evening I got talking to a young professional-seeming (smart jeans, shirt, laptop on his knees, speaking a particular type of English) Indian man as we shared an Uber ride. In between typing furiously into an excel sheet on his laptop, he made small talk with me and asked what I was doing in Delhi. He looked surprised as I – a white British woman– told him I was interested in Indian English: “oh”, he laughed, “you’re here to see how badly we have treated your language!” A few weeks later, I was summoned to the Foreigners Regional Registration Office to sort out a problem with my registration application. When I finally met the officer handling my case, I handed him a copy of my documents, which included my research proposal. Scanning over it, he asked me what I was hoping to study here, and when I gave him the usual answer, he looked at me wide-eyed, laughed and repeated: “Indian English?” As I talked him through the site of my research, he added, “Right, you’re trying to see how good or bad we are teaching English, hai na (isn’t it)?”

While it was certainly not my intention to assess “how good or bad” the English teaching was, I was nevertheless recurrently interpellated, through my whiteness and British-ness, as an authority over the language. One morning at the NGO, students were in disagreement over the ‘correct’ pronunciation of the word ‘job’, as they had watched an American video where the pronunciation /dʒɑb/ had confused them. When Rupal, the facilitator, intervened, she pointed to me, stating, “she can tell us better, she knows the proper one”. Embarrassed, I told them to use whichever, to which Rupal replied, “First you learn Indian. Then you can do American and British. It will take time to improve”. A hierarchy of Englishes is thus created, wherein Rupal and the students envisage Indian English as a stepping-stone on the path to British or American English, or, as she says, ‘proper’ English.
In his work on English in South Korea, Joseph Park refers to the ideology of self-deprecation to describe how South Koreans view themselves as “‘bad speakers of English’ who, despite strenuous efforts to learn the language, do not possess sufficient competence in English to use it in a meaningful way” (2009:80). He argues that this is not unique to South Korea, but rather “a local manifestation of globally circulating discourses of English which implicitly assumes traditional standardized native-speaker varieties of English to be the acceptable norm for global English” (ibid:227). This is, of course, nothing new, and, as we know, is particularly common in colonised spaces. But it is important to reiterate the persistence of such discourses, particularly as it raises questions as to why certain speakers – the upper-middle and upper classes – are, according to other studies (Sahgal 1991; Sheorey 2006), ostensibly able to declare pride in, and take ‘ownership’ of ‘Indian English’. As Proctor argues, while the ideological framing of English has shifted in India (from being an “outsider’s language” to a source of “national pride”), this remains limited to “the English-educated upper or upper middle-class elite” (2010:57). Those in the NGO, from very different backgrounds, however, do not reproduce such a reframing, firmly rejecting the legitimacy of Indian practices of English, and thus perpetuating the ideology of self-deprecation.

The discursive rejection of Indian English practices was not confined to the workshop, but rather was part of everyday interactions at the NGO. As students were leaving class one afternoon, Shama, a young woman in her final year of school, approached me to ask, in English, when I planned to return to London. As she spoke, she pronounced London as /landɪn/. Without missing a beat, Amir, the class facilitator, span round in feigned horror, and pointed to her, exclaiming:

Amir: /landɪn/ /landɪn/ see the people those who call /landɪn/
Shama: are [oh come on] Sir she understood (laughs)
Amir: like /am<r>i:ka/ [America]
Shama: we are in English-medium right but still we are Indian so (laughs)

He repeated her apparent blunder several times in a highly stylised way – that is, through a “specially marked and often exaggerated representation” outside
of his usual repertoire (Rampton 2009:149) – elaborating with an over-
exaggerated trilled /<r>/ and vowel deletion in his pronunciation of
‘America’ (/am<r>i:ka/). Through her protests and embarrassed laugh, it
was clear that the student had understood the facilitator’s stylisation as an
attempt to mock a certain way of speaking English in India, and to playfully
 tease her ‘mispronunciation’, which was clearly not appropriate for this
English classroom. Shama attempts to defend herself by claiming that I had
understood (which I did) but when this protest is met by further teasing, she
adopts a second line of defence by mobilising ideologies of self-deprecation
and reminding the facilitator that, while she may study in the English-
medium section of her government school, she is still Indian so, necessarily, she
doesn’t speak English ‘properly’. In other words, her Indianness is a
fundamental obstacle to ‘good’ English. While Shama studied in an English
medium section of her government school – and therefore has a relationship
to the language that one would be hard pressed to define as “foreign”
language learning – she nevertheless continues to construct Indian speakers
of the language as fundamentally incompetent.

The fact that I had understood what she said was clearly irrelevant to
Amir. By criticising an utterance that nevertheless achieved its communicative
aim, Amir sheds light on how certain Indian English practices – regardless of
their denotational value – become stigmatised (notably, here, related to
pronunciation and accent), and how, while studies may claim that English-
medium educated upper-middle classes are demonstrating pride in ‘Indian
English’, such pride is not extended to all forms of ‘Indianised’ English. Given
the teasing and the speed with which Amir responded to Shama’s utterance,
he flags this up as a particularly grievous ‘error’. Amir himself had previously
been a student at this same NGO, and told me in great detail about the
suffering he had endured growing up in a poor Muslim family; how
throughout his Hindi-medium education, he longed to speak ‘proper English’
and carve out for himself a shining future. In this interaction, Amir not only
criticises the apparent mispronunciation, but also mobilises implicit models of
people who speak that way: “see the people those who call /landɪn/”. To say
/landɪn/ is thus to reveal yourself as a particular type of person. Here,
through his teasing, he distances himself from ‘those people’, positing this
speech as not – or perhaps no longer – his own, and locating the speakers of
such English in a “stigmatized, subordinate position” (Sandhu 2015). Indeed, as LaDousa writes, “sometimes people bolster the status of their own English-medium education and their status as middle-class by decrying or mocking the [stigmatised forms of English]” (2014:191). Although Amir was not educated in English-medium, his competency is now strong, and so his teasing can still be understood as a means to reinforce this competency and, through this, his class aspirations. Given his background, it may also, as Nakassis argues, be a means for Amir to distance himself “from the anxiety that in another’s eyes, they might actually be that person” (2016:105). Through this, he demonstrates how different practices of English in India appear to entail particular social judgements that stratify Indians into hierarchised linguistic groups. There is thus a tension between the student’s (humorous) self-deprecating claim that her ‘incompetency’ is the fault of her ‘Indianness’, and Amir’s implication that such ‘incompetency’ should only be expected of certain Indians. Here, then, we see how ‘Indian English’, while often constructed as a homogenous entity, encompasses a collection of associated practices that are subject to judgement in different ways. There are certain practices that are devalued more than others through their association with certain speakers, demonstrating thus:

how the splintered, hybrid, and unequal Englishes that exist on the postcolonial Indian ground are entrenched at base in a class based divide (with ancillary divides of gender and caste as well), with issues of inequality, subordination, and unequal value seeming to revolve directly around English’s general positioning with vernacular languages (Ramanathan 2015:207).

Thus, we can see that certain ways of speaking English that are understood as ‘Indian’ are not only devalued because they do not conform to an idea of what ‘legitimate’ English is, but also because they reveal social meanings about the positionality of the speaker (I expand on this in Chapter 6). As such, it is understandable that these students who – as we will see – suffer stigmatisation through their caste and class positions, discursively reject all Indian English practices (while nevertheless engaging in them) and seek instead to acquire ‘proper’ English.
5.2.2 English, ownership and authenticity

While the terms the students used in the workshop to refer to ‘proper’ English (‘British’, ‘American’, ‘Professional’) are themselves problematic given that they are rather nebulous and conflate a diverse range of practices, varieties and registers, this does not stop them from being a “powerful social fact” (Urciuoli 2013 [1996]:107) which becomes a yardstick against which these students constantly find themselves falling short, but to which many consistently aim for fear of the consequences. However, the consistent valorisation of British or American norms stood in conflict with other circulating discourses. The term ‘international language’ was frequently used at the NGO, not only as reasons for wanting to learn English, but also embedded as part of the curriculum and included as a discussion point in class. This ‘international language’ framing creates the impression of English as a disembodied object, “detachable from its speakers’ socially grounded identities such as gender, ethnicity, or social class” (Park 2010:24) in line with the neoliberal framings of language-as-skill as laid out in Chapter 3. That is, language is seen as an “activity rather than an attribute” (Heller & McElhinny 2017:234), to be picked up and adopted by any individual, globally. As Saraceni and Cushing (under review) argue, the ‘international’ framing of English sits within a cluster of frequently used metaphors that discursively construct English as a global language, spreading across the world, through which “English is attributed the capacity to grow, expand and move independently from human intervention”, thus discursively erasing human agency by attributing it to the language itself, thereby sanitising the colonial history of English (ibid).

This stands in contradiction with older ideologies that frame languages in terms of “authenticity”, in which “language has a soul” (Heller & McElhinny 2017:234), creating thus “a point of intersection between conflicting ideologies: language as an external or neutral system vs. language as an internal possession of ‘native’ speakers” (Da Silva, McLaughlin and Richards 2007:190). This became particularly clear in one of the interviews with Amir, the facilitator. It is worth quoting this extract at length in order to demonstrate this ideological conflict, and how, while the NGO reproduces discourses of English as an ‘international language’, it is ultimately the
ideology of English as “an internal possession of ‘native’ speakers’” (ibid) that remains hegemonic:

Katy: so in that erm example you gave where it’s the joint family and everyone’s arguing and then this outsider comes in ok/ so the outsider in that example was English

Amir: English yes

Katy: so you think English can be considered as a neutral language

Amir: I think that it is right now it is like one neutral language which we have and one language which we which can, you know connect all of us

Katy: why is it neutral er who does it belong to

Amir: ok er why it is (whispers) ok/ er sometimes you know we think that you know /// for example in same/ in the same joint family when you ask somebody else to come we just try to understand whether that person is neutral or not right/ so of course not/ that that person cannot be neutral all the time in his life/ but most of the time he was neutral/ do you understand/// so that’s what I’m thinking by the way I’m saying the word/ do you understand means/do you understand what I’m trying to say

Katy: yeah yeah

Amir: like this (laughs) of course/ you understand everything (laughs) but I’m just saying ok so in that scenario I’m saying that that person has er/ done something in his life right and that person has done most of the time correct /// not all the time but most of the time and same in English also I feel that most of the time they have done/// I’m not talking about British/// they have long history (extends his arms) right so that is completely different, and that is past, come on

Katy: ok

Amir: Right now now England of course they have really nice people they’re not going to you know now
Katy: I’m not going to be offended if you say anything (laughs)

Amir: yeah you know that right

Katy: yes you’re free to say anything (laughs)

Amir: yes ok (laughs) so yes of course you understand right

Katy: yeah

Amir: so now this is/ now they are living nice/ that was past/ right that time was like that that was time when people were living because they were cap what do you call captured or what/ capture means taking over you know

Katy: yeah

Amir: that’s how they were living right so that was something that was time the need of that time/ / right now time is different people are living nicely so I think these English people can be the right people to you know get er means inspire and you know to use their language just you know as a/ /

Katy: do you do you think English is seen as belonging to the British because when I said is it neutral you were talking about British so clearly there’s this association with English and English people

[section omitted – a student entered and engaged in conversation with Amir]

Amir: we have just you know like just like one scene I saw it is like so there is no American English there is just English and then we have mistakes

Katy: (laughs) like that/ / right where did you see that

Amir: means it’s just famous with the with the Queen and the poster with that right, she/ and it was written there that we don’t have American English British English we just have English and then we have mistakes (laughs) so rest are all mistakes (laughs) so it’s like
Amir begins by explaining that English can be compared to a disinterested outsider who could enter a situation of squabbling – much like a neighbour intervening in a dispute in a joint family (several generations living together in one household) – to offer an impartial view. In this way, as Mohanty argues, “the colonial language emerges as a ‘neutral’ language of preference” (2019:79) in the face of conflict between indigenous languages. While Amir acknowledges that there cannot be total neutrality, through this allegory, English is painted as “most of the time” neutral. However, it is at this point that he switches from referring to the language as a detached, disembodied linguistic object, and reifies it as the language of a people by referring to the language through its perceived speakers: “not all the time but most of the time and same in English also I feel that most of the time they have done”. He interrupts himself quickly here to gloss this statement, stating, “I’m not talking about British” and acknowledges the long colonial history, which he emphasises by extending his arms. Here, one can note the awkwardness that Amir may have felt having this conversation with me – a white, British woman – and my own unease is evident in my eager reminder to him that “I’m not going to be offended if you say anything (laughs)”. This tension is managed by his use of the third person plural “they” to refer to the British rather than the second person “you”, and by relegating colonialism to the past: while he acknowledges the colonial history of the language, Amir discursively erases the continued impact of colonisation in the present day by referring to the colonisers as the British, and today’s people as the English (thereby implying a separation between then and now and by extension between the colonisers and myself), and commenting that this “long history” is “completely different, and that is past”, emphasising the point further with the discourse marker, “come on”. And yet, even with Amir’s framing of colonisation as ‘the past’, this does not imply that he understands English as having been ‘appropriated’, or decolonised, by India. On the contrary, English continues
to be viewed as the property of the English, and, according to him, both the language and its people can contribute a great deal to India: “I think these English people can be the right people to you know get er means inspire and you know to use their language”. In this way, English is framed as ‘neutral’ because it is an outsider to India (outside of the ‘joint family’) but it is not neutral in the sense of an internationally shared language. It belongs, ultimately to England, and is indissociable from English ways of being. He demonstrates this further through his reference to a Tweet that he had shown me a few days before (figure 5.1; Queen UK 2014), from a parody account of Queen Elizabeth II.

As a parody account, the Tweet is often interpreted as humour designed to mock the arrogance of the British and British institutions, and yet, for Amir, the tweet is funny because it expresses a fundamental reality. When I expressed my discomfort with the joke (“that’s so horrible! (laughs)”), Amir does not follow my criticism, inviting me instead to ‘admit’ the obvious truth: “this we know, means and this is sort of, come on, it’s true”, emphasised once again with the discourse marker “come on”. Later in the conversation, this framing of ownership is expressed more explicitly:

Katy: what do you mean by correctly // what does that mean speaking correctly

Amir: means/ ok speaking correctly means it’s supposed to/ ok so you you have your language ok it’s your native language and you know better right
so do you understand what I’m saying // for example you/ your community actually you know it’s your language yeah you started it you spoke you speak that language right so who else can correct my English right // I think you are the right person to correct my English because you started it // ok/ er I invented something I invented this bottle right (takes bottle) so if I invented this bottle so I think I am the right person you can ask that how to invent it or you know how to use it/ how to make it and then this everything // so I am the right person right now right // although of course now there are many people those who designed it and copied it but still I’m the/ I think you will come to me to know do you understand // because I started it so I must have you know more knowledge // of course they they did you know updated something or some right but I think that’s what I’m saying right

The language here is shown to have a clear origin story that can be traced back to the British, much like one can trace an invention (a bottle – an object) back to its inventor. While one can “update” it, the original inventors continue to hold the patent – or, at the very least, are those with a true understanding of how the object works. Extending this metaphor to English thus means that those who “started it” are the only ones deemed authoritative enough to decide what is right and wrong. Amir is not upset or slighted by this framing: we are far from the postcolonial drive to reclaim English from the colonisers. There is no need to be upset, in Amir’s framing, because when the language is constructed as a bounded object (i.e. it is a clear-cut homogenised ‘British English’ and the rest is ‘mistakes’) with a traceable nation-state ancestor as the sole legitimate user, the notion of ‘shared ownership’ makes very little sense – and indeed, the battle would be futile. There is, at the end of the day, only one legitimate ‘English’, with one legitimate nation-state lineage. We see here the persistence of the native/non-native speaker dichotomy, and while it has been routinely debunked multiple times over the last few decades (e.g. Rampton 1990), it:

…remains a central category for the way speakers of English construct their own and others’ position in relation to the language particularly given the ways in which popular conceptions of nativeness intersect in important ways with national boundaries, as the identity of native speaker is often assumed to be associated more commonly with particular national identities rather than other sorts of identities (Park & Wee 2009:403).
The concept, then, of ‘Indian English’, does not make sense within this framework – it cannot be legitimised.

5.3 On bounded languages and purity
The above sections have raised the issue of how English is understood by students and teachers as a bounded entity with a clear lineage, deviations from which are delegitimised. Indeed, this is not unique to English, and is further bolstered by the ways in which language-medium divisions are the primary factor by which schools in India are characterised. As LaDousa and Davis write, “language-medium distinctions have come to serve as an especially important way through which people in South Asia recognize their own and others’ identities” (2018:2), which has the effect of “pit[ting] one language against another” (ibid:5). While many note that this stark division is heavily contrasted with the fluid nature of multilingualism in India (Mohanty 2019; Agnihotri & Khanna 1994), it nevertheless becomes “a crucial rubric by which people position themselves in contexts both in and out of schools” (LaDousa & Davis: 2018:19). This creates, for the students, a very clear demarcated boundary between languages, and consequently between speakers. In this section, I explore the discursive construction of English – or ‘good’ English – as that which is free of Hindi, before interrogating discourses of code-switching and error correction, in order to address the ways in which the social positioning of these speakers impacts how they perceive themselves to be able to use the language.

5.3.1 Proper English as English free of Hindi
Besides English, the most noticeable other language in question at the NGO was Hindi – the main official language of the country and a dominant language in Delhi. The NGO followed a strict no-Hindi policy, basing this philosophy on predominant trends in the ELT industry that discourage the use of the L1 in the classroom (Ramanathan 2015), although such approaches have been problematised (Littlewood 2013). On the large water pipes that ran along the top of the walls in the centre, students and facilitators had painted reminders accompanied with drawings of flowers or smiley faces: Please do not
speak Hindi; Please speak in full sentences. On a laminated copy of the NGO’s expectations for facilitators that sat on their desk, they were reminded to use only English at all times. When a new cohort of students joined in my final week, the third rule given to them by the teacher, after punctuality and regular attendance, was to not use Hindi:

Do not use Hindi/this is totally restricted//as you are coming here for learning English you should speak in English// Hindi I don’t tolerate/ if someone speaks in Hindi please get out from the class// English means English.

When I asked students what they thought about the no-Hindi policy, they looked rather puzzled, as if the question had an entirely obvious answer: it was the only way to ensure they learnt English ‘properly’. Facilitators too propagated monolingual learning discourses by encouraging students not to lean on Hindi to construct sentences: “you translate from Hindi right? So this is not the right way to learn English”. These logics draw not only on ideologies discussed previously that construct languages as bounded objects, but also on those which paint language mixing as potential interference: to embrace Hindi in an English-learning space is to risk rendering impure the language. Students monitored themselves and others for their use of other languages. I rarely heard them speaking in Hindi – much to my great surprise, as students in the private, international English-medium school in Gujarat where I worked constantly flouted the English-only rule, and persistently complained about it. At the NGO, the no-Hindi rule was willingly adhered to and, when students did ‘slip’ – by, for example, using a Hindi discourse marker such as lho, it was often immediately accompanied by blushing and an apology. I was also highly aware, however, that my presence seemed to have an impact on this. While this is not to say that I assume they spoke Hindi necessarily in my absence – indeed, the importance they gave to the rule would indicate that this was not the case – my positioning as a researcher, as a perceived representative of sorts of NGO management (although this had no real truth to it at all), and as a British English speaker meant that they often found themselves apologising to me when they ‘transgressed’. One morning as students were fitting their new books with protective covering, two teenage
girls were giggling together, singing songs, and, from what I could work out, play-acting scenes from films. “I love you meri jaan (my love)”, one of them joked, immediately clapping her hand over her mouth and gasping. “I just spoke in Hindi”, she whispered to her partner, as they both began to laugh. At this point, she looked up and caught my eye, smiling shyly, as if trying to gauge whether or not I had ‘caught’ her. “What happened ma’am?” she asked – a common expression in India akin to ‘what’s the matter, what’s up?’ “Nothing” I returned, smiling back, “I was just listening”. She looked at her friend, eyes wide, but still smiling, aware that I must have heard what she said. “I’m sorry – it was my mistake”, she replied, and continued covering her book. Another afternoon, as students stood outside the centre after class, I walked out to go and buy tea. As I exited through the door, one young woman who had her back to me was talking in Hindi. She turned around quickly, and jumped as she saw me, switching immediately back to English as the other students stifled a laugh. At that moment, I felt an urge to tell her to continue, to speak in whatever language she wanted. They were outside of class and there was no rule that obliged them to be speaking English outside of the centre. I ignored the impulse, however, and simply smiled and walked on. On reflection, I am glad I did: while I can understand, from a removed perspective, that the no-Hindi rule is taken to an unnecessary extreme, as a white British woman who cannot identify with the intense pressure they are put under to speak ‘correct’ English, it would have been disingenuous of me to do so. The stakes are much too high for these students – much higher than those of the children from privileged backgrounds who I taught in the private school in North-West India, whose self-assured competency in English, material resources, and privileged socio-economic statuses perhaps allowed them more freedom to engage confidently in fluid practices (Kubota 2015) without risking unwanted consequences.

The extent to which students invested in the no-Hindi policy was evident in the almost absurd situations that it often led to. In one discussion circle during the “Question of the Day” warmer – an activity set daily by head office to be completed at the beginning of each session – one student noted that Arnav, a 17-year-old student, had used ‘Hindi words’. He looked rather surprised, slightly irritated, and asked her what he had said. When she refused to repeat the words, Arnav pestered her to help him understand the
'mistake' he had made, and she reluctantly wrote them down on a piece of paper to show to him, all the while refusing to say them out loud. At a facilitator training session, one trainee wanted to give an example of a particular question structure that he found his students using, which he believed to be a calque on Hindi. It was clearly very difficult for him to make this comparison without using Hindi, and so he interrupted himself and asked the class if he could use Hindi just to give the example. The chorus-like response was an emphatic no from the other trainees, and so he had to make do by explaining with only English. Of course, this rather hampered his explanation and, seeing that the room looked quite puzzled at what he was trying and failing to explain as he had been prohibited from giving an illustrative example, he sighed and gave up. In both interactions, not only was time wasted, but also potentially important pedagogical discussions that could have arisen from these interactions were ignored, as the no-Hindi rule took prominence over all else.

Such an insistence on keeping English free of all Hindi elements occasionally resulted in confusing situations for the students. As part of their final evaluation at the end of the course, students engage in a group book discussion with an external examiner (from head office), who sits with 5-6 students at a time, as they summarise the books they have read, respond to the examiner’s questions, and engage in discussion with one another. This is the part of the exam that the students were most anxious about, as it meant they had to handle spontaneous questions and demonstrate a certain degree of analytical thinking. As these evaluations took place in the centre, I was able to observe one of them, during which a confident young woman was describing the story she had read – a book in English (of course) written by an Indian author. She referred to an important character in the book – nanaji, and in the feedback session that followed the evaluation, was advised by the examiner to avoid using ‘Hindi words’ in English. The student looked crestfallen, presumably worried that this would negatively impact her grade, and attempted to defend herself. The character in the book was referred to as nanaji – she was just following suit – and, in any case, the book was set in India, so it was normal that there would be Hindi terms. Her defence was not successful, and the examiner encouraged her – albeit politely – to use the English term ‘grandfather’ instead. Yet, the English substitute here is
insufficient: nana refers specifically to a maternal grandfather (the father of one’s mother), and thus this information is lost with the term ‘grandfather’, and the suffix ji is a Hindi term that denotes respect. These are both lost in translation. In order to retain the strict bounding of languages, information that indicates personal relationships and stance is sacrificed. Furthermore, the students are taught an important lesson – regardless of whether Indian writers themselves use Hindi terms in their writing, they must not.

It became very clear how internalised this understanding was for the students in the ways they reacted to the frequent discourse marker ‘slips’. Students very frequently used tho (‘so’, but also used to mark emphasis), nahnin (no, not), ke (relative pronoun – ‘that’) and yaar (an informal form of address literally meaning ‘friend’ or ‘fellow’, but also used as a discourse marker). They were just as frequently pounced upon by their peers for doing so. This struck me particularly as these examples are heavily used in English in India – my colleagues at the International school, the students there, friends I made outside of work, all frequently engaged in these practices in their English and this was rarely commented on negatively. I too often found myself picking up these practices whenever I stayed in India for a certain length of time. And yet, it appeared extremely important for these students to ‘rid’ themselves of anything that would not be considered English. Once again, I was forced to reflect on why these students felt such strong resistance towards engaging in what could be termed linguistic fluidity, and the ways in which my own positioning as a white British woman, or my highly educated Indian friends’ relatively privileged positioning, allowed us a greater degree of freedom.

This blanket ban on Hindi, as the instances above have demonstrated, proved to be difficult to put into practice at times. In fact, it often became a huge hindrance. Both facilitators admitted that they would have preferred more leeway, especially with newly-enrolled students who were struggling to follow simple instructions, and who could have potentially made better progress if they had been allowed to check their own comprehension by using a language they felt comfortable in – and one that they shared with everyone else in the room. Divya, a young woman who often struggled to keep up in class had much difficulty with the pronunciation of certain words. She would often attempt them, only to be corrected multiple times by the facilitator and other students, to no avail. Rather ironically, one of the words she appeared
to find difficult was ‘pronunciation’. In one class, she had been pulled up yet again for her mispronunciation and was desperately repeating it, growing more frustrated with each utterance, and nowhere closer to emulating what had been deemed the ‘proper’ way. She eventually gave up, and her neighbour discreetly scribbled something on her notebook. Divya looked at the note and began whispering to herself. “You got it!” her partner exclaimed, prompting Divya to say it aloud. “Pronunciation”, she beamed, and the class applauded. I asked her later what her friend had written in her book – she had transcribed the word with Hindi script, and, in doing so, had allowed Divya to get a handle on the word she had struggled with for so long.

Despite how helpful the use of Hindi could be in class, I saw very little push from either the facilitators or students to incorporate it. Much like for Vaish, this demonstrates an “overlap of beliefs” (2012:65), wherein the usefulness of Hindi for pedagogical purposes was acknowledged, but they continued nevertheless to support the monolingual norm. This was not only because of the strict rules set by management that bound the teachers to follow their policy, but also due to what appeared to me a demonstrable pride that students took in speaking English with no Hindi. At the end of the first session with a new batch of students – those who Rupal had informed of the three key rules (punctuality, regular attendance, and no Hindi) – she asked what they had enjoyed the most. As she went around the circle of 15 students, the third replied, with a huge smile on his face, “I like don’t use Hindi’. The other students nodded, and this became the answer that several of the students after him provided. Clearly, then, we see not only the discursive bounding of discrete languages, but also the symbolic value that is given to the language as bounded. The NGO encourages the students to place value not only in English, but in an English free of Hindi, reminiscent of the participants in LaDousa’s study, for whom “more important than English’s institutional difference from Hindi is the type of English that a school offers” or, in other words, an English free of Hindi (2014:69). This is indicated, too, in the framing of the rule. While, the same policy existed at my old school, it was coined ‘SPEO’ – Speak English Only (a practice that exists in many English-teaching schools and centres in India (Jayadeva 2019) as well as more globally). At the NGO, the emphasis was not on speaking English, but on not speaking Hindi. Thus, we see how, through the discursive shaping of the rule, the students’
language practices are framed as containing problematic elements that need to be removed.

5.3.2 On code-switching & linguistic purity

If ‘good’ English was an English that contained no traces of ‘Hindi’, this was contrasted with an understanding of ‘Indian English’ as synonymous with Hinglish, or what could be understood as code-switching between Hindi and English. I use code-switching intentionally, rather than the more recent term ‘translanguaging’ (García & Wei 2014) to draw explicit attention to the way in which the students constructed the languages as strictly bounded entities that were ‘mixed’, rather than understanding this ‘mixing’ as the result of fluid practices as implied in a translanguaging framework. That is, English was demarcated very clearly as a bounded entity associated with a particular people – with a degree of flexibility permitted for differences in ‘American’ and ‘British’ English, although, again, these were constructed as singular entities. And this was not just the case for the students: when I had first arrived at the hostel where I stayed during my fieldwork, Dev, the member of staff who I later became friends with, asked me what I had come to study. When I answered him – as I had answered the student – that I was interested in what people thought about Indian English, he burst out laughing, adding, “oh, you mean Hinglish!” This framing was echoed by students such as Arnav who recounted to me in interviews following the workshop what they understood Indian English to be:

Indian English is like same that er/ somewhere people don’t know English word so they use Hindi word and/ and we we don’t know English idioms because we are not native speaker so that’s why we use Indian idioms and we translate in English

As Arnav demonstrates, Indian-English-as-Hinglish is not to be celebrated but rather is viewed from a deficit perspective. Rather than embracing fluid practices and understanding ‘Hinglish’ as a practice of drawing on multiple repertoires, it is understood as a failure to speak English ‘correctly’ and thus indicates low English competency. While there is an understandable tendency
to celebrate fluid practices within certain scholarly circles, such celebration is absent from discourse of these speakers, even as they engage in such practices.

Beyond these instances, there were also multiple examples of students and facilitators engaging in meta-linguistic discussions of language mixing, which implied (directly or indirectly) notions of language purity. That is, the desire to keep languages strictly within their constructed boundaries. This was not unique to English – there existed, too, an anxiety regarding the ‘deterioration’ of Hindi, as it is ‘no longer proper’:

Rupal: and somewhere we use er/ like nowadays we Indian people don’t speak Hindi properly that’s not Hindi which we all speak/that’s Hinglish language actually because somewhere we use er Punjabi words somewhere we use English words somewhere we use Hindi Sanskrit all the/ all the languages together but er/ if you talk about pure Hindi then you should watch any serial that/in serials/ like there is a there is a serial called Radha Krish so they speak proper Hindi [...] because er the Hindi which we speak it’s not Hindi it is the mixture language [...] but Hindi I think in this world er// means not in this world but most of the people 99% of people don’t know proper Hindi// I can say that because we don’t use that proper Hindi we always try to in all the sentences there will be one word of English or one word of any other language

Rupal, the facilitator, appears here to be drawing on wider circulating discourses of shuddh (pure) Hindi that shed light on anxieties over the growing ‘deterioration’ of the language (“nowadays we Indian people don’t speak Hindi properly”), which arose similarly for LaDouss (2014). As I sought to interrogate further the purity discourse, I searched Quora – a forum site widely used in India – for the term “pure Hindi”, which brought up countless entries:

- “How do you think will Hindi language be given respect and considered cool by the Indian youth? (Hindi here means pure Hindi)” (Quora, n.d. a)
- “Bollywood is gradually incorporating more Urdu vocabulary in Bollywood movies and songs. When will the language of Bollywood become completely Urdu? I hear more pure Arabic words than pure Hindi words in Bollywood songs” (Quora, n.d. b)
• “What do Indians prefer: someone who speaks pure Hindi or someone who speaks Hindi sprinkled with English words?” (Quora, n.d. c)

Each of these questions speaks to a slightly different anxiety regarding the ‘purity’ of Hindi: the potential lack of ‘coolness’ attributed to a bounded Hindi from Indian youth; the incorporation of Urdu (indicative of the underlying tensions between India and Pakistan that often play out through their structurally similar but politically different languages, Hindi and Urdu, and whose different scripts can be seen as “indexical markers for contrasting religious identities” (Durrani 2012:35, see also Rahman 2011); and the social weight attached code-switching practices. This anxiety is one that is also borne out at a governmental level, through attempts to “forge a scientific lexicon for Hindi” (LaDousa 2014) to allow for a ‘pure’ Hindi to be used, rather than borrowing English words. As Vaish has argued, this corpus planning “has political implications, in that it favors the higher castes or classes of Hindi speakers” (2008:20) (because it uses their language practices as the standard) and, as it was based on Sanskrit, gave Hindi “a very Hindu nature and alienated the Urdu speaking Muslim community” (ibid:21). Further, as these anxieties indicate, the framing of language boundaries as a question of purity contains undertones of morality, which is connected not only to the language but also to the speakers, framing thus those who engage in ‘impure’ practices as morally deviant. As Stroud argues:

a notion such as code-switching, for example, has been variously associated with moral attributes such as laziness, debauched and anti-social behavior, as well as resistance to state authority, whereas speaking a ‘pure’ language was seen as an accomplishment of a loyal citizen (2007:28).

Consequently, then, we see a drive to reinstate ‘pure’ Hindi, with online texts encouraging people to learn the ‘shuddh’ (pure) terms and avoid fluid practices:

Hindi is one of India’s official languages. Yet, even the majority of Hindi-speakers probably can’t say confidently that they know the language well. Our day-to-day communication happens in Hindi mixed with English with words flowing freely between Punjabi and Urdu.
Have you ever thought what it would be like if people spoke purely in Hindi? Ever wondered how words of everyday usage are called in Hindi?

Well, we compiled a list of 50 *shuddh* Hindi words of everyday usage that you probably didn’t know before. Time for some *shuddh* vocab lessons, folks. (Pareek: n.d.)

By the simple fact that this is written in English, one can assume that the target of critique is not English itself, but rather the use of English (along with Punjabi and Urdu) within Hindi. The rhetorical question implies a quasi-utopian vision of a future where this would no longer happen: “Have you ever thought what it would be like if people spoke purely in Hindi?” (The irony of using the Hindi term ‘*shuddh*’ in an English language article that disparages language mixing appears to be lost on the writer). Further, a moral judgement is implied through the suggestion that “even the majority of Hindi-speakers probably can’t say confidently that they know the language well” – a rather absurd statement given that Hindi is the first language of millions of Indians. The implication, then, is that what these people speak is a *degenerate* version of Hindi, not worthy of the term ‘*shuddh*’.

While the websites cited above can provide an indication of wider ideologies of language purity, they cannot account for the ways in which students engage with them. Upon inspection, we can see that the ways in which fluid language practices are viewed are highly contingent on the people engaging in said practices. That is, judgement calls made upon speakers for their code-switching practices are very much dependent on the positioning of the speakers and their interlocutors, as became clear in Arnav’s interview. After talking about language ‘mixing’, I asked him what his thoughts were on such practices:

Arnav: it’s good and some time I proud that yes Hindi is a language that we can add any language and it’s good er/ mixtures when we listen it’s good and we can learn er/ I learned so many words from this type of English

Katy: hmm and erm if you were talking like that ok imagine you were talking with a friend sometimes English sometimes Hindi both
Arnav: yeah mix

Katy: what would people think about you

Arnav: er /they think that er I know English and they talk me very politely or they gave me respect/ they think that er I know English and if he asks me/ if he ask/ if I ask them any question and they did not catch that’s why/ and they did not er understand what I what I said that’s why they gave me respect/ /and they ask me as sometimes they ask me that what’s the meaning of that and/ they ask like that

Katy: this is people who do not speak English

Arnav: han [yes]

Katy: hmm right but what about er if somebody who speaks English they hear you talking mixing Indian er Hinglish er argh (laughs) Hindi and English together ok then what will they think of you / an English speaker

Arnav: If English speaker / er first er first of all English speaker will not talk me like that / she he or she will speak in if he knows or she knows English then she will speak in English or in Hindi means they they will not mix

Katy: are you sure they never mix together

Arnav: they mix when we are friendly when they talk informally / when they talk formally they never mix / like er if I and ma’am will talk so when we talk in er [NGO name] we we talk in er we will not will never use Hindi words/ and when we talk outside so we can er we add some words while talking / so formally we cannot say and informally we can add

Katy: hm and if you see somebody speaking a mixture of Hindi and English what do you think about them

Arnav: I think that ohh he knows English (laughs) then I should / er er / I am more focusing on that person and I / and I think oh what he or she is saying I
can listen and because if I listen that I can learn some new words and my listening practice is also er going

Katy: and if you are in a conversation with Indian people ok they are all speaking English and you are using sometimes Hindi sometimes English/ / they also speak Hindi but they are only using English/ and you are using a mixture of Hindi and English what will they think about you

Arnav: er maybe they will think that er I know that very low English and that’s why I am using these words [...] ok er/ maybe er might be they would think about me that I don’t know this much I don’t know good English I know some words and/ yeah I know some words and he don’t/ he don’t know very good English and er / he is not properly educated not educated er yeah educated // he is not properly educated

Arnav was a particularly interesting young man to interview. As we will see in Chapter 8, he often expressed critical views on dominant discourses that were reproduced within the NGO. He was also one of the only students to explicitly show pride in fluid language practices (“it’s good and some time I proud that yes Hindi is a language that we can add any language”), and he noted how it had helped him in his learning (“I learned so many words from this type of English”). But more importantly, during this conversation, he also sheds light on how the value given to Hindi-English code-switching is dependent on the context and the speakers themselves. To begin with, when asked how people receive him when he is using ‘Hinglish’, he appears rather proud to tell me that they would certainly be impressed. Later on, he demonstrates that he would have a similar reaction to people who he witnessed code-switching “I think that ohh he knows English (laughs) then I should er er I am more focusing on that person”. Thus, the imagined code-switching person here holds a form of symbolic capital, because their use of English within Hindi implies a command of the English language, and thus, indexically, deems them worthy of respect. However, as my follow-up question clarified, in this imagined scenario, those who are impressed by the code-switching are not English speakers. When the scenario is reversed, and the imagined listener becomes an (Indian) English speaker, we see that Arnav imagines their reaction to be very different: “maybe they will think that er I
know that very low English ... he don’t he don’t know very good English and er he is not properly educated”. Here, Arnav loses his capital as he moves into a different imagined scenario – a different field – in which the capital of English is dependent on only English being used. When Arnav hypothesises using these same language practices in a different context, rather than being impressed, his imagined interlocutors judge him as uneducated. He acknowledges how his linguistic capital is not stable, but rather wholly contextually contingent (we return to this notion in more detail in Chapter 7).

We can also see how the students’ caste and class positioning may also play a role in the weight of their linguistic capital, which brings once again to the forefront the stakes at play when these particular students engage in fluid practices. To code-switch in front of English-speakers would be to prove stereotypes about their community correct: that they do not speak English properly and, indexically, that they are indeed uneducated. This became starkly clear to me one evening as I presented my research at a university, where an Indian researcher who had been educated in English-medium and had studied across the world noted the very different circumstances that existed for her given what she acknowledged as her own class privilege. She and her friends, she recounted, never thought twice about what people may think of them when engaging in fluid language practices, and engaged in them frequently and unselfconsciously, with no thoughts to potential social consequences. Drawing on the work of Rosa and Flores (Rosa 2016, Rosa & Flores 2017), Lo argues:

Displays of sociolinguistic variation from racialized speakers can get taken up as evidence of deficit, confusion, and inadequate past language learning, while similar productions by those understood as non-racialized get cast approvingly as evidence of sociolinguistic deftness, skill, and futuristic dynamism (2020:298)

Both Arnav and the Indian researcher mentioned above are racialised (as Indian) in the same way. However, if we can substitute race for caste or class, then we can draw parallels here with the ways in which Arnav’s imagined fluid speech practices are viewed differently (and negatively) from the same
type of fluid speech produced by those positioned differently in terms of their caste and/or class. In her 2015 paper, Kubota asks:

What potential social consequences are imposed on hybrid language users and are such consequences unevenly experienced? Can users regardless of their racial, gender, socioeconomic, and other background equally transgress linguistic boundaries and engage in hybrid and fluid linguistic practices? (p.33)

It would appear that the social consequences of using fluid linguistic practices for the students from poorer families and stigmatised castes are severe: these students cannot transgress boundaries without potential negative social and material consequences.

5.3.3 Error correction
The above examples have demonstrated a deep-seated anxiety around speaking English ‘correctly’ through a fear of what speaking English in certain ways may reveal about the speaker. As I argued above, this can be seen in terms of self-deprecation (Park 2009), which, far from being an idiosyncratic response, is rather an affective response that finds its roots in wider discursive framings of English speakers that are connected to their positionality in a larger national and transnational, stratified, imagined community of English speakers, and to their social positioning in terms of class and caste. This anxiety is not only evident in the stories recounted by students, but also in the day-to-day practice in class – or what I will term a culture of error correction that was dominant at the NGO. That is to say that the process of learning English becomes one of ‘cleaning up errors’, in which the focus is much less on providing students with additional language resources and more on correcting perceived pre-existing problems with the students’ language skills, in ways that echo Cameron’s (1995) work on verbal hygiene. Ironically, this stands in stark opposition to the Western-oriented ELT approaches that the NGO promulgates in its training that seek to encourage fluency first with less emphasis on accuracy (although see Cushing (2020) for analyses of language policing and the promotion of standardisation in UK schools that resonate with the data explored here). While this does indicate a policing of language
through policy and the curriculum, I argue that it is also revealing of strategies that the students learn to adopt in order to get what they perceive to be the most valuable resource, and upon which their self-esteem and future prospects hinge. Such a focus on correction can only make sense in an ideological framing of English-as-bounded-object with a clear lineage (in that any divergence from this is necessarily, logically ‘wrong’), and it works to shape within students a corrective habitus.

Having worked as a language teacher for ten years, I was struck in the first few days of observation by the pervasiveness of this culture of error correction – one that is also evident beyond the NGO both through ‘accent training’ courses in call centres (Cowie 2007) and the “seemingly endless assortment of grammar books aimed to improve IE [Indian English] speakers’ English toward outside standards” (Chand 2009:406) which are not “are not for English beginners, seeking instead to ‘correct’ local forms” (ibid). Facilitators allocated monitors for particular grammatical points (past tense monitor, plural/singular monitor, articles monitor, and so on) who were responsible for noting and correcting any errors made by other students within their remit. At the back of their books, each student had an ‘error tracker’ where they were encouraged to note down and correct mistakes they made as well as those of their peers. This peer correction often went unprompted, offered sometimes by several students at the same time, and was, on most occasions, appreciated by the student who had made the ‘error’, who then repeated the reformulated response. This happened sometimes several times within a single sentence, and it was clear that prominence was given to accuracy over fluency. I was particularly struck by the patience of the students – both of the correctors and the correctees, as this process often made discussions rather disjointed and students often lost their train of thought as they went back to repeat a sentence multiple times. When students were lax in their peer correction, they were prompted by Rupal, “Please find each and every mistake in your sentences and correct. Whether that person is frustrated or not you tell them. At the end your English will be improved. Nothing else matters, that’s the best result”. And yet, I rarely saw any frustration at being corrected from the students – it appeared, rather, that they found this process valuable and an integral part of achieving what they understood to be ‘good’ English. When asked during a session how they plan to help other students
achieve their goal, the first reply from one student was “I will correct their mistakes”. We see then how language policing becomes part of the culture of the learning space, but in ways that allow us to move away from “dichotomies such as top–down versus bottom–up” which “may not capture fully the dynamics of the processes of normativity and normalisation that operate there” (Blommaert et al. 2009:206). These dynamics of normativity and normalisation of language policing stem from a dialectical engagement between explicit pedagogical practices on which the NGO draws, and which are embedded within the curriculum and reinforced by the facilitators, and the ground-level desire among the students to ‘help’ one another achieve what they understand to be their goal – ‘correct’ English.

For the students towards the end of the course, this corrective habitus had become so ingrained that they no longer needed reminders or guidance from the facilitators. At the end of class one morning, Rupal asked a student to run after another student who had just left the building and had forgotten her book. “Ma’am calling you/ er/ Ma’am is calling you” the student shouted, as she ran up the stairs. Rupal laughed, amused at the student’s diligence: “she’s correcting herself outside also”. Although this intense focus on errors could indeed be interpreted as simple diligence from the students, I argue that the reason why this culture of error correction becomes so deeply rooted is related to the anxiety felt by students of speaking ‘incorrectly’. As I walked into class one day, I overheard a student, who appeared rather upset, telling the facilitator, “If I make any mistake they will hear and laugh on me”. I remain unaware of the particular context of this student’s upset, but what she did demonstrate was this palpable fear of making mistakes outside the classroom. While students visibly felt comfortable making mistakes in front of one another, doing so outside of the classroom – where the stakes were entirely different and their linguistic insecurity was heightened (Bourdieu 1977b) – was another story. It appears then, that students embrace the potential embarrassment of being corrected in class if it can help them avoid the greater shame of making an error in front of English-medium educated friends at university, for example. This anxiety was equally noticeable in the frustration that students sometimes showed when they made ‘mistakes’ – frustration not at being corrected, but at making an error; a frustration that
they demonstrated through clicking their tongues, screwing up their faces or hitting themselves on the head.

Such a picture of the day-to-day interactions of students around error correction stands in contrast with how the NGO attempts to shape the students’ learning process. “We teach them that it’s ok to be wrong”, the CEO recounted to me over lunch one day. And this philosophy is evident throughout the syllabus, which is peppered with stories of successful people making mistakes and learning from them. Indeed, judging by its tatty cover, one of the most read books from the library was ‘It’s Ok to Fail, My Son” by Vasant Kallola. And yet, despite this lesson that the NGO sought to ingrain, it seemed clear to the students that it was very much *not* ok to be ‘wrong’ – particularly when it came to speaking English. At one of the facilitator training sessions I observed, one young facilitator made a suggestion to the others that they connect on ‘What’s up’ to discuss their problems. Many jumped in to correct his ‘mistake’ (What’s up/WhatsApp). He appeared visibly quite annoyed, repeated the ‘correct’ pronunciation, and shrugged, “whatever”. Next to me, a young woman laughed, shaking her head – “no, no, it’s not whatever”.

This interaction between the trainee facilitators here demonstrates why this culture of correction permeates the NGO so deeply. For the young man who was corrected, his irritation may have stemmed from the embarrassment of being corrected as a teacher, in front of many other English teachers, leading him to brush off the correction as unimportant. For the young woman, however, the correction is *not* unimportant. While for the CEO and those who designed the syllabus – all educated in English-medium schools – it may be important for the students to learn to accept their mistakes in order to encourage growth, for the students, the stakes are too high. As the previous sections have highlighted, to make what are perceived as ‘errors’ is to potentially reveal something about your social positioning. This was particularly notable in the specific types of error correction that happened at the NGO. Pronunciation was corrected the most, with grammatical ‘errors’ coming a close second. Notably, the pronunciation errors were those that are particularly stigmatised as being ‘too Indian’ – the /v/ and /w/ merger (Chand 2009; Cowie 2007), or confusing /s/ and /ʃ/ in words such as ‘fish’ (/ʃɪʃ/, fis/). Students thus made a concerted effort to ‘rid’ themselves’ of
certain indexically loaded ‘errors’, and were frequently prompted to do so by the facilitators, who, having been in the students’ positions themselves, are all too aware of the need to speak ‘correctly’ if they are to potentially capitalise on the value of English for social mobility.

It is important to contrast this with another interaction in order to, firstly, highlight the importance of taking into account the individuals who engage in these discourses, and secondly, to gain a more nuanced understanding of how, why and for whom the culture of correction is so deeply ingrained. After observing a training session at head office, I was looking for a particular trainer who I wanted to observe that afternoon. Unable to find her, I asked a senior trainer if he knew where she was. Unbeknown to me, as I said her name – one which I had heard for the first time that day – I mistakenly used a short vowel sound rather than a long one, and pronounced it in a way that made it sound close to a rude slang word in Hindi that I was not familiar with. The trainer looked instantly embarrassed, staring, wide-eyed at the floor and paused for a second, before repeating her name the correct way, and informing me of the vowel sound that I had mispronounced. He appeared visibly anguished to be correcting me, and quickly added: “I am so sorry to correct you, but if you say it wrong it sounds like a rude word”. Through his justification there was an implication that, had the error been ‘harmless’ (i.e. not one that led to an unfortunate mistake), he would not have corrected me. This interaction struck me as standing in contrast with the ways in which students and facilitators freely corrected one another, and were encouraged to do so. Of course, the fact that our interaction did not take place within a formal language-learning context where corrections would be expected, is important to acknowledge, and may account for why he would offer an explanation for his correction. That said, correcting the pronunciation of a name that one may have never heard before, I would argue, is a less face-threatening act than correcting someone’s grammar, and so the context alone may not account for the visible anxiety he felt at correcting me. Instead, I argue that the authority invested in me as an invited researcher from a London university, and more importantly, as a white British woman, may have contributed to his discomfort. He was thus hesitant to correct me at all, despite the fact that a) this was a particularly problematic error that required intervention to avoid potential future embarrassment, and b) the correction
was related to a Hindu name, with Hindi phonemes, a language that I was still in the process of learning, and in which he unarguably had more expertise. This culture of correction, then, seems to only apply to certain people: it is not indicative of a wider tendency to freely engage in correction of speech, in any language, but is rather contingent on the positionality of the speaker, and the corrector.

5.4 Discursive struggle
While the sections above paint a picture of strongly-rooted ideologies, there were nevertheless moments of what I understand as discursive struggle – attempts to question, unpack or refute discourses – particularly those which devalued Indian English or which implied an adherence to British or American norms. As laid out in Chapter 3, this study holds that discourse is not only reproduced but also potentially contested through practice. Contesting hegemonic discourses or ideologies is not, however, without difficulty. As I will demonstrate in what follows, these discursive struggles proved to be ultimately futile as they inadvertently continued to be built upon ideologies of language as a bounded object with a clear nation-state and ethnic lineage, and continued to hierarchise ways of speaking in relation to an imagined standard. Furthermore, these discursive struggles, as we will see, are fundamentally hampered by the political economy of English in a globalised world. Constructed within such an ideological framework, and within such material conditions, all that seems possible is a slight shift in the ideological language hierarchy that extends its tolerance to ‘educated’ Indian varieties (and thus to a certain Indian social class), while the ideological foundations remain undisturbed.

5.4.1 Rejecting British norms
Although the devaluation and delegitimisation of Indian ways of speaking English from the students was frequent, this narrative was noticeably contested in other spaces. Dev, a member of staff who I befriended at my hostel, was very vocal in his frustration with what he understood as expectations when speaking English. Having worked for many years in a call centre for a British train company, he had undertaken several accent reduction
training programmes. When I met him, he spoke in ways that allowed me to identify him as Indian and did not appear to be using English in stereotypically ‘British’ or ‘American’ ways. He was, however, capable of doing so, and would often amuse guests and other staff members by ‘performing’ a particular ‘accent’. And yet, he was strong in his conviction that he did not want – nor need – to speak that way. In the call centres, he had not enjoyed ‘faking it’ – indeed, he had not enjoyed his time at the call centre at all, particularly given the racist abuse he often received from customers – and, after leaving that job, he decided never to try to adopt that way of speaking again (except, of course, for occasional humorous performances): “so I just stopped it long time, I’m like ok I’m just gonna speak how I speak”. As far as he was concerned, he was already making the effort to speak English, which was more than sufficient:

Katy: so why/ why do you not care about speaking like an American

Dev: what I think//first of all I’m speaking English that is more than enough// and now if someone is asking me to take an accent also I’m like why I should// first place I should not know only6 English/ I should not speak only in English/ I should speak whatever language I want/ some Indian language// even though if I am speaking English still it’s not enough and you want me to have an accent//why// I mean so I’m like no (laughs) I’m not gonna do that

Dev thus refuses the imperative often felt by the students at the NGO to adopt British or American norms, refusing to comply with what he sees as expectations on the principle that he should not really even have to speak this language. This challenge to dominant discourses is both laudable and understandable, particularly given his unpleasant call centre experience. However, we also see how this act of resistance is framed around ideological underpinnings of linguistic authenticity and property that the previous sections explored. Here, English is not considered an Indian language “I

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6 My assumption is that ‘only’ is being used here as a discourse marker which is very commonly used in India to place emphasis (a calque on the Hindi ही), similar to the use of ‘even’ in other varieties of English. Thus, he is not saying that he should not uniquely know English or uniquely speak English, but rather “I should not even know English, I should not even speak it”
should not speak only in English, I should speak whatever language I want, some Indian language", but rather as a language imposed upon Indians from outside through colonialism. Dev thus does not contest the notion of linguistic authenticity and ownership per se, but rather simply refuses to follow what is perceived as the implication – that the norms of the ‘owners’ should be adhered to.

Dev’s refusal to participate in the valorisation of British/American norms was noticeable on several instances, and he seemed to find an ally in this within his co-worker, Viraj. While I was away from the hostel for a few days visiting a nearby city, a young Indian woman had been staying there, and left just before I returned. When I got back, Dev and Viraj had just completed her checkout, and were joking together at the reception. “Katy you should have seen her yaar, she was faking that accent, she was total nonsense”. Apparently, the young woman had spoken with what they perceived as an exaggerated ‘British’ accent, and she had “never even visited there”. I did not meet the woman, but the amusement that she provided the young men was palpable, as they mocked her for ‘trying too hard’ and having a ‘fake accent’. These examples are in line with similar tales recounted to Chand, who remarks:

The fake accent phenomenon has become a social reality for these IE [Indian English] speakers, and discourse about fake accents is then used to challenge global(ized) ideologies about nativeness, about language acquisition, and about differences in local and global authenticity and social authority (2009:413)

In this interpretation, the young men’s teasing could be understood as a discursive attempt to reinforce Indian English’s local social value. Equally, however, it could also be an indication of Dev and Viraj mocking the young woman for her attempts to perform ‘above her station’ (with no further information on the woman, I cannot know). In his study of students in South India, Nakassis demonstrates how the anxiety produced by speaking English is not only a case of not speaking well enough, but also “about speaking English too well”, which can be perceived as “uppity and arrogant” (2016:108), rendering the speaker “a pretentious snob or a poseur” (ibid:93). Either way,
this challenge posed to dominant discourses was quick to flounder. At the hostel one evening a few days later, Dev rushed over to me when I arrived, excited to tell me about a YouTube video he saw, teaching Indians to speak with a British accent (I often wondered, but never found out, whether he had sought this out himself – thus potentially contradicting his claims to reject ‘outside’ norms – or if he had chanced upon it). “First”, he said, “that guy was talking in an Indian accent so I was about to change”. When I asked him why, he replied, laughing “I just thought it would be something boring but then he changed and said ‘see I’m sure when you heard me talking you just thought I was whatever’”. As it turned out, the video was made by a British Indian man in an attempt to inform his audience of linguistic discrimination – and the title was a ruse to encourage people to watch. The speaker had begun in strongly Indian-accented speech, eventually switching to his natural ‘British’ accent in order to prove the point that his viewers would take him less seriously if he spoke in the former (and indeed, this was precisely the reaction Dev had). Having had multiple conversations with Dev about such topics, he knew that I would be interested in the video. Indeed, I was, but I was more interested in how Dev made so explicit his initial disregard for the video when the speaker sounded identifiably Indian. In doing this, Dev demonstrated the indexical links between Indian-sounding English and a lack of authority, despite the fact that Dev also speaks in an identifiably Indian way, and he therefore belittled himself too through this interaction. It appears then that, while Dev refuses to adhere to British or American spoken norms, he continues to make social judgements based on the ways English is used by some Indians.

Later that evening, I had dinner with a Bangladeshi friend who I had met in the hostel. Masuma had been in Delhi for over a month waiting for her study visa from a European embassy (of which there were none in Bangladesh). I had personally been quite struck with how she spoke when we first met as she sounded ‘British’ but had, as she told me, lived her whole life in Dhaka. I realised, as I commented upon this to her, that I had offended her, as she frowned and sighed, frustrated. My comment was not the first, apparently, and she explained how she was irritated by how many people commented on her “lack of accent” – that is, her lack of an identifiably Bangladeshi accent. It irked her particularly when these comments came from Indians: “they expect me to speak like a Bangladeshi, and they are shocked to
see me speaking properly”. This, for Masuma, was evidence of what she perceived as a superiority that Indians lauded over their neighbours, particularly with regards to English. And yet, I never witnessed Dev or Viraj mocking or teasing Masuma for her English, despite the fact that she spoke in ways that were close to what one could identify as a British accent. Perhaps what was humorous about the first woman – who I did not meet – was her inability to ‘pull it off’. She was mocked by the young men because she sounded ‘inauthentic’, she was ‘trying too hard’. She had failed in performing the ‘British’ variety convincingly, and thus had become the target of ridicule. Thus, it appears that the problem is less about emulating British (or American) spoken standards, and more about the ability to do it ‘convincingly’ – or even, who you are when you are doing it.

We can see, then, several layers of interrelated and contradictory discursive struggles that demonstrate how differently positioned subjects attempt to navigate dominant discourses surrounding English. On the one hand, Masuma’s speech practices can be interpreted as an attempt at a discursive struggle against what she perceives as the inferior positioning of Bangladeshis by Indians. She does this by ‘proving’ that she is capable of speaking ‘properly’, which she sees as achievable by associating herself with the ideological valorisation of a British standard (most notably through her accent). On the other hand, we see Dev and Viraj’s declared refusal to use British or American accents, which could be framed as a discursive struggle against the imposition of external norms. However, when picked apart, we see that the object of critique is not Indians (or Bangladeshis, in this case) who speak in a British-sounding accent, but rather those who those who try and fail to do it authentically. For Dev, eschewing British or American accents is to be celebrated, but, at the same time, one must not speak in a way that could be understood as inauthentically British (the woman in the hostel), or as too Indian (the man in the video).

Most notably, we can see here a different reaction to ‘Indianised’ ways of speaking from Dev and from the students I interacted with at the NGO (and, indeed, with Masuma). For the students, it appeared relatively clear that any Indianisation was illegitimate; for Dev, a certain amount was tolerable. We are reminded through Dev of Kachru’s call to “let the model be educated Indian English” (1976:235), which reveals a deeply seated classism in which
only certain forms of English associated with particular types of education in India are legitimised. The ‘acceptable’ Indian norms here are those based on ‘upper class’ forms, which recreate an internal hierarchy (Tupas & Rubdy 2015; see also Parakrama 1995). Thus, we see how discourses that frame English in a general sense as leading to employability or social mobility are revealed to be flawed in a context in which certain (upper) middle class standards hold “a disproportionately higher potential for accumulating more capital” (Chatterjee & Schluter 2020:85).

This leads us to raise questions about what allows for these divergent reactions. What leads Dev to engage in apparent discursive struggle, while the students, and Masuma, tend to adopt more conservative approaches? I argue that the life trajectories and social positioning of the individuals are critical for such analysis. That is, while Dev grew up in a small fishing town in Goa with relatively little money, he explained to me that caste was never an issue for him growing up – his parents are from different religions, and inter-caste marriages were common in his hometown. He does not seem to have faced the stigmatisation that the students in the NGO felt, and thus his habitus has been shaped to a lesser extent by the social positioning of his caste identity. He felt a desire to learn English as a teenager so that he could leave the village and pursue a higher-earning, more stable job in call-centres or the tourism industry. Learning English for Dev was thus more of a pragmatic decision – at least, in how it was framed – and less an essential part of proving his self-worth, which, as we will see in Chapter 6, is a key reason why students in the NGO invest in English. Importantly, Dev has already acquired the level of competency in English required to negotiate his own social mobility, and the particular industry he had experienced (call-centre work) had left a rather sour taste. Taken together, these aspects thus provide Dev with slightly more freedom, and perhaps desire, to push back against norms and expectations – a privilege that the as yet jobless students from a stigmatised caste are unable to take advantage of. For Masuma, patiently, anxiously waiting in Delhi for her European visa, armed with a small padlocked folder where she kept her certificates provided by the British Council that bore witness to her English skills, speaking ‘properly’ was both her ticket to a European university and her way of reasserting the dignity and competency of Bangladeshis.
And yet, while their reactions diverge, they are fundamentally built upon the same logics, that is, an ideological framing of the language as a bounded, static object with an identifiable epicentre and varying degrees of legitimate and illegitimate deviation. The static nature of the object is made clear through the framing of the ‘Indianisation’ of English as purely an issue of accent – the grammatical, syntactic, morphological and so on variations across various English practices in India are discursively ignored (even while they are used). Such discursive struggle, then, allows Dev to negotiate the frustration he feels about being more or less coerced into learning English for employment, but it does not disturb, in any fundamental way, the ideological foundations upon which the perpetuation of inequality through English is based.

5.4.2 Re-appropriating English?
One Sunday, I observed a training session at the NGO headquarters that was taking place across several weeks for new facilitators whose English skills had been deemed in need of a refresher. The session was led by Ravi, a senior trainer, who had studied in English-medium school, and who was very keen for me – the visiting British researcher – to observe his classes. The objective, he told me, was not only to help these facilitators ‘improve’ their English, but also to boost their confidence. Many of those in the session had been educated in Hindi-medium and then became students at the NGO – much like Amir and Rupal, although neither of these were in these sessions – and these extra Sunday classes were designed to help them feel more at ease in their new English teaching roles.

When I joined the session, I was pleasantly surprised to hear Ravi encouraging the students to take pride in their ‘Indian’ ways of speaking. They should not, he insisted several times, seek to ‘copy’ the British or American accent, as there was nothing wrong with speaking ‘like an Indian’. My surprise was borne from several years’ teaching in an international school in Gujarat, where the vast majority of teachers shared the view that it was important for the students to follow British or American norms (although in practice this was rarely the case). To make his point, Ravi had lined up a selection of videos to show to the students. “In the morning I said I would show you a video of Indians who speak good English”, he reminded students,
before playing them a stand-up comedy clip from an Indian comic. The comic in question spoke in what would be easily recognisable as an Indian accent, with occasional use of Indianised lexical items such as ‘Modiji’, and clips from Hindi-language news channels and songs (although he did not himself use any Hindi). Ravi had chosen this video in order to show students that English can still be ‘good’ even when spoken with an Indian accent: “He has a pretty good accent – I mean he’s understandable”. Two things are of note here: firstly, we see again the framing of ‘Indian English’ as simply a question of accent, and secondly, the justification of this man’s speech as being an example of ‘good English’ is based on comprehensibility – “I mean he’s understandable”. This comment raises the question of intelligibility, which necessarily implies an outward positioning – that is, it frames the assessment of ‘good’ English in India as dependent on the judgement of their interlocutors. “If you use your accent from school”, Ravi continued, “nobody will understand you”. The emphasis then is on these students to make themselves understood in speech. As Rajagopalan (2010) has highlighted, the notion of intelligibility is far from neutral: “no matter how one tries to define intelligibility from a neutral standpoint, the question that cries out for an answer is: ‘intelligible for who?’” (p.467). Indeed, as Ravi elaborated, there was “nothing wrong” with their school English, “but only Indians can understand, foreigners won’t understand you”. As such, while his discourse appears to displace the notion of the native speaker by seemingly granting legitimacy to Indian English speakers, upon inspection, we see that the ideology persists: “the figure of the native speaker creeps back in, only this time through the back door and that too most stealthily” (ibid: 468). In this way, “intelligibility among diverse English speakers becomes mainly a non-native or nonstandard English speakers’ matter, leaving native or standard English speakers’ power unquestioned” (Kubota 2015:31). This is evident not only at the NGO but also in call-centres, indicating thus that this is a wider trend (Chand 2009). The emergence of industries such as accent-training benefits the so-called ‘native speakers’ (or, to a certain extent, ‘educated Indian speakers’ who speak an ‘educated’ variety) who are able to capitalise on ‘intelligibility’, thus reinforcing their colonial and class-based authority over the language. Thus, like Dev, Ravi does not unsettle the ideological framework that devalues Indian English practices – perhaps precisely because he is aware
of what is valued and valuable on the market, or acceptable in global English language exams. Rather, like Dev, he merely widens the net of tolerance slightly to allow for ‘intelligible’ Indian-accented English while reinforcing the hierarchy of speech practices that relegates the students’ ‘school English’ – arguably a couched reference to class, given that the majority of the trainees in the room attended government schools – to a devalued, undesirable position.

Despite celebrating, to a certain extent, the speech of the Indian comedian, Ravi then proceeded to show the students a video “with an Indian who has a much better accent”. His choice of clip was revealing: an interview with Priyanka Chopra on the Canadian news channel CBC. Chopra, a famous Indian actress, attended several prestigious private English-medium schools in India before moving to the U.S.A for three years when she was 13 years old. There is thus only a vague ‘Indianness’ to her accent – and certainly no evidence of structural linguistic divergences that one may qualify as ‘Indian English’. It is also noteworthy that she is being interviewed by a Canadian journalist for a Canadian channel, and thus there is a high likelihood that she may be demonstrating linguistic alignment with her interlocutor and with her imagined audience. Whatever the reason may be, while Chopra’s speech is recognisable as Indian, she is both structurally and phonologically much closer to an imagined standard North American English than the comedian in the first clip. “See how her accent is better?” Ravi asked the students, who all enthusiastically agreed. The message is clear: a little ‘Indianness’ is fine, but the less, the better.

However, it was the final clip that Ravi chose that I found the most interesting. As the third clip in what he presented as instances of increasingly better ‘English’, the implication was that this was the ‘winner’. It was a clip of Hasan Minhaj, another stand-up comedian – the difference, this time, is that Minhaj was born and raised in California. His Indian parents migrated to the U.S.A before he was born: Minhaj is American, and identifiable as such through his speech. By presenting this to the students as the ultimate ‘good’ English for Indians, Ravi not only contradicted his previous comments about Indian students not needing to ‘copy’ American or British norms, but he also mobilises raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa & Flores 2017) that conflate languages not only with the nation-state in a Herderian sense (Bauman &
Briggs 2003), but also, and here most saliently, with race. Hasan Minhaj’s English is celebrated by Ravi as a good example of how ‘Indians’ can speak English, despite the fact that Minhaj is – and has always been – an American citizen, and, although certainly a problematic term, would qualify by all definitions as a ‘native speaker’. And yet, by choosing this clip – by implying that there is something to be celebrated about Hasan Minhaj’s fluency in a language that he was both educated and socialised in through his upbringing in America – Ravi reinforces an association of native speakerness with race and, by extension, whiteness (Kubota 2015). Whether Ravi knew or not that Minhaj is an American is beside the point – the most salient characteristic here becomes his race. Although his intentions were likely well-meaning, Ravi presents to the students a hierarchy of speech practices, with the ultimate goal being one that is practically unobtainable as it is based on American ‘native-speaker’ norms, and which also carries the implication that racialised Indians – wherever they grow up – are not authentic speakers of the language in the same way as white speakers. In this way, English is not only associated with a nation-state, but with a people, and such a framing mobilises relations of authenticity, that is “the perception that a speaker bears particular racial, ethnic, or other background attributes stereotypically understood to be essentialized markers of membership in a specific group” (Park & Wee 2009:396). Authentic English speakers – in this framing – are white, not Indian. One can trace these ideological framings, as Carlan has shown, to colonial linguistic surveys that drew on modernist, evolutionary paradigms and thereby reinforced “an essentializing relationship between language and race in colonial India” (2018:100). Importantly, Carlan argues, this ideological framing has not been relegated to the past, but rather continues to shape language policy in India, as evidenced by the postcolonial reorganisation of states according to assumed language communities, by a recent Linguistic Survey of India that continues to reinforce language as the dominant factor of ethnic and regional identity, and by the “ongoing knowledge production about language in India and related movements for political recognition on linguistic and cultural grounds” (ibid:119; see also Nakassis and Annamalai 2020). As such, the trainer’s comments are indicative of colonial ideologies of language that persist today in the way in which not only English but also
languages more generally are discursively constructed as linguistic objects with an evident, traceable, racial heritage.

Ravi ended the video session with a reminder that the trainees do not need to copy American or British norms, but once again placed the onus of intelligibility upon them: “Do you see how it’s up to us?” In terms of the logic of intelligibility, it would certainly appear that it is up to them. It is also, however, an almost impossible task. Once again, we see how acts of discursive struggle that attempt to encourage students to embrace their own linguistic practices fall flat because they inadvertently continue to build upon underlying ideologies that deny legitimacy to such practices. Attempts to foster inclusion here, then, ultimately “end up producing inequalities by valuing certain kinds of knowledge and linguistic capital over others” (Duchêne et al 2013:13).

5.5 Conclusion
What we can see, then, is that there exists, for the students and facilitators, a persistent understanding of ‘good’ English as a clearly bounded object – Urciuoli’s “powerful social fact” (2013) – although in a practical sense, this construct quickly falls apart as there is a great deal of inconsistency over what precisely counts, in linguistic terms, as correct ‘English’. What is important is thus not the object itself in a structural sense, but rather how the discursive construction of the object reinforces a binary of correct/incorrect that produces a deep-seated anxiety in the students. Any perceived deviation from the ‘norm’ (and once again, deciding what counted as a deviation was often very inconsistent) is not accepted – not only because of the ideological construction of English as a bounded object that remains inextricably bound to its ‘original’ nation-state ‘inventors’ (in Amir’s words), but also because to stray too far from this norm is to engage in linguistic practices with negative indexicalities that are particularly harmful for those already in stigmatised and marginalised positions. By examining instances of discursive struggle against these deep-rooted narratives, we have seen not only how certain individuals are better positioned to engage in (relatively) resistant practices, but also how this struggle is rendered extremely difficult given the persistent underlying ideologies that map languages onto certain peoples, and the wider
global political economy of English in which only certain forms of speaking English are profitable – forms that are inextricably tied to colonial and class-based orders and which allow only those with access to such linguistic resources to benefit from them. Having mapped out what good ‘English’ as an object means to the participants in this study, we move now to an interrogation of what they perceive this linguistic object to offer them – that is, not to Indians in a general sense, but to these particular students, with their particular life experiences and social positioning.
Chapter 6 - What English means

6.1 Introduction
When I first saw Binita in class, she struck me as acutely shy. Aged in her late 30s, she wore her long, curly hair swept back with a hairclip and, unlike the younger women who often attended in jeans and t-shirts, dressed every day in colourful salwar kameez (traditional dress/tunic and trouser suit) and dupatta (scarf/shawl). She often sat towards the corner of the room, at the edge of the horse-shoe circle that was used for class discussions and would wait until everyone else had spoken before offering her opinion, listening attentively to the others so she could use their sentences as a frame on which to hang her own. Her fellow students were pleasant with her, but I noticed how she was never included in the occasional group plans to go shopping and would often sit quietly with a book in her lap, waiting for the class to start as the other women chatted loudly together. She was enrolled in the third morning session, a group that was only attended by women, not through any restrictions from the NGO but rather due to the timing of the class. As a mid-morning class, it was convenient for these women – almost all of them mothers, including Binita – as it allowed them to finish their housework, send their children to school, and return home to cook lunch. A few weeks into my stay, I found out, through Rupal, the facilitator, that Binita also worked as a maid at the centre and came each morning before class to clean the classroom. It was not Binita who told this to me – indeed, when I asked her if she had a job in the interview with her and Anjali, she simply said that housework (meaning, I interpreted, in her own house) was her job. Perhaps I misunderstood, perhaps she couldn’t find the right words in English to tell me what she did, or perhaps she did not want me, or Anjali, the more middle-class presenting woman sitting next to her as we spoke, to know that she was a maid. When I saw her cleaning one morning as I came in early to the centre, she gave me a very shy smile; I was never able to figure out whether the other women in her class – all housewives with no other employment – knew about her job. When Rupal told me about how Binita came to join the classes, she explained that she had noticed Binita hanging around, listening to the beginning of the classes as she finished her work in the morning, and on several occasions would try to speak some English to Rupal, for example, to
tell her she needed to clean the floor Rupal was standing on. Through this, Rupal told me, she recognised in Binita a desire to learn English that, according to Rupal, was unusual for maids. And so, Rupal approached her to invite her to enrol. Binita protested – she had had very little English training, she had attended Hindi-medium school, she couldn’t possibly join the class. As a compromise, Rupal suggested that she informally attend a few classes just to see how she felt. A short while after, Binita walked up to her and smiled, tentatively: “Ok, I join”. Six months later, when I arrived at the NGO, Binita had made progress, but was still finding it a great challenge. She was nevertheless visibly proud of herself, despite her hesitation in class. When I interviewed her, I chose to also invite Anjali, a fellow student around the same age as Binita who was much more confident in English, as I worried that Binita would feel too shy to be interviewed alone. Not wanting to single out Binita, I offered them both the option of conducting the interview in English, Hindi, or both, and I was surprised to see that Binita especially was adamant that we talk in only English. “What do your neighbours think of you now that you speak English?” I asked. She beamed, and tried to put into words how she felt “I speak English so another person think she speak English she’s erm erm…” She struggled to find her words, and Anjali prompted her to use Hindi to express herself. She sighed, still smiling, and said “ok bahut padhe likhe lag rahi ho (laughs) [she seems very educated] but er but I said no no no jankare zyada nahi hai [not much knowledge is there/I don’t have much knowledge] but I speak English. Wrong or right but I speak it”. In contrast to many of the younger students we met in the previous chapter for whom ‘correct’ English was perceived as imperative, for Binita, it didn’t really matter much that her English level was still not particularly ‘high’, or that she was unable to express this sentiment to me in English. Unlike many of the other students, Binita had no plans to use her English to find a different job, but rather she simply hoped to be able to help her young son with his homework. Above all, what mattered was that she was now considered by her community, her neighbours to be an English speaker. She talked rather movingly of the pride her husband (who does not speak English) had in her for learning English, of the pride she felt when he or their neighbours asked her for help with the language, and this had made all the difference. English, for Binita, meant a radical redefinition of her self-worth as a person within her community, within this particular field.
Binita’s experience shines light on how English is understood as important for people in India for a variety of complex reasons, as well as on who English is perceived as being desirable for, and who is made to feel like they belong in English-speaking spaces. It demonstrates how, beyond discourses that frame English as a desirable object for the purposes of employability, the desirability of English is equally built upon far more complex elements that cannot be understood through a lens that focuses solely on potential economic gain. In this chapter, I will first seek to map the ways in which English is discursively constructed as an important language in India, for reasons that are dominantly, but not limited to, money and employability. Arguing that individuals’ social positioning and life experiences need to be taken into account when seeking to understand their motivations for learning English, I then unpack the affective dimension of relationships with English, in order to provide a more nuanced explanation for how and why certain Indians engage in English learning – and why others do not. Finally, I will consider alternative framings of English which seek to challenge the alleged importance of the language, with varying degrees of success, in order to sketch out the complex picture of the multiple ways in which English means in India.

6.2 The discursive importance of English

As mentioned in chapter 5, in my final few weeks at the NGO, I gained permission from management to run a short workshop with a couple of the classes that I had spent the most time with – the 10am class of entirely women, most of them housewives with young children, and the 11.45am class, made up of predominantly young women freshly out of high school, and one male peer of a similar age. The aim of the workshops was to give the students some time and space to reflect on what English meant to them, both in the sense of what symbolic meaning English held for them, and what the word ‘English’ meant, in terms of how they imagined the delineations of the language, and what was worthy of falling under this umbrella term – or not. I had wanted to run the workshop since arriving at the NGO, since the first day when the facilitator, Rupal, had encouraged me to join a group of students sitting in a discussion circle, and had asked me to think of a topic for them. Feeling rather
‘put on the spot’, the first question that had sprung to mind was: do you think English should be compulsory in education in India? The general response was an emphatic yes. And yet, the reasons they provided were all but homogenous, ranging from the outright pragmatic (without English we can’t work on laptops) and instrumental (we need it for jobs; we need it to help our children with homework) to the symbolic (it is the most important language; Hindi doesn’t have so much status). Having lived in India for several years, I was unsurprised by these responses. I was, however, intrigued by certain responses that seemed to be less interested in the pragmatic or the instrumental, and which hinged more on the affective. “I feel confident now. I don’t have fear”, one young student beamed: “It makes us different from what we were earlier”. It is to these heterogeneous responses, and their sources, that this data chapter turns.

6.2.1 English means wealth

I opened the workshop with a paired discussion activity on the question ‘Is English important in India?’ As the students talked together, I noted down snippets that I overheard – ‘job’ and ‘interview’ were repeated multiple times, and it was one of the first reasons provided when I brought the students back together to discuss as a group. What struck me, however, was that the focus was not on English as a requirement for undertaking the jobs per se, but instead, as a requirement just to sit for the interview. This indicated that the need for English in the workplace was understood by these students as a sorting factor in order to be interviewed, rather than as a ‘skill’ which was necessary for the post (Roberts 2012). In both of the sessions I ran with the students, not a single one mentioned any job in particular; English was thus seen as an indiscriminate pre-requisite, no matter whether the job in question actually required English competency for the role. Indeed, in their research on English and employment in Sri Lanka, Herat and McLoughlin also note how English is often used first and foremost as “as a way of selecting and screening employees” (2010: 57), which reassures employers that they are recruiting the ‘best’ candidates, “irrespective of whether the post actually requires an English speaker” (ibid: 63). Such discursive shapings of English in India – whether they are factual or not – appear to give English an almost magical quality, in which it is constructed as a ‘one size fits all’ key to the labour
market. The potency of this discourse was made clear through the multiple
rumours students recounted to me of acquaintances with no qualifications but
‘fluent English’ being offered jobs on the spot (see also Jayadeva 2018). In an
interview with Mohit, a young university student who had struggled a great
deal trying to keep up with his English-medium educated counterparts at
university, he shrugged as he stated what he perceived as a clear reality: “They
don’t need qualifications. They know if you have good English you come [in
any job]. If you don’t have good English, you go away”, adding a while later,
“without it, we are useless”. We see thus a shift, in Annamalai’s words, in
which “the image of English as the language of oppression in the colonial era
has come to be projected as the language for freedom from poverty in the
postcolonial world” (2005:32).

More than helping speakers acquire jobs, English was also perceived to
provide a much higher salary. Seemingly random statistics were cited in class
(“English gives you a 50% salary increase”) and stories of English-speaking
friends of friends and distant cousins on improbably high salaries were
swapped by the students, often dissolving into a competition over who knew
the English speaker with the highest salary: a Yoga teacher who earns 10000
rupees per month while their English-speaking counterpart earns 25000, or a
nurse friend who makes 8000 while their English-speaking colleague earns
over 20000. Of course, I did not follow these up, nor did I carry out any
research into this as a trend. What was more important to me was how
frequently these stories circulated around the NGO, and the excitement with
which students and facilitators told them.

Such stories demonstrated the ways in which English is consistently
associated with wealth, so much so that, for many of those I interacted with,
English-speaking spaces were discursively constructed as necessarily rich
spaces – and vice-versa. This is reflected in the ways in which English medium
education is unequivocally associated with private education, with
participants in LaDousa’s (2017) ethnographic study considering it “a
foregone conclusion that the most expensive schools in Varanasi were English
medium” (p.88; see also LaDousa & Davis 2018), which ideologically erases
the existence of fee-paying Hindi-medium schools (LaDousa 2014). Amir, the
afternoon facilitator, talked to me at length about what we could term a
linguistic-spatial division: in private hospitals, high-end restaurants, “any
office, right, any malls or good shops – Dior, Versace and all. You’re going there, they speak in English. So what happens, wealth is there right“. The correlation is thus understood as a causation, wherein English appears to be the precursor to wealth, and not a product thereof. That is to say, rather than seeing the ability to access and thus use English – or what is perceived as ‘good English’ (see Chapter 5) – as hinging almost entirely on the financial ability to access expensive English medium schools, English is understood by students as a sure-fire way to a good job, and good money. This is further emphasised by wider discourses of the monetary value of English that the NGO is investing in through its randomised control trial, run by a prominent American university, which seeks to compare incomes of graduates from the NGO with those of their non-NGO peers. The emerging results are advertised in a strapline on the homepage of the website, which argues that many graduates from the NGO more than double their income. As I demonstrated in Chapter 4, these discourses paint language ability as “the only thing holding people back from enjoying the benefits of globalization: upward mobility, better jobs, social betterment, and movement into a “better” culture” (Proctor 2014: 307). This discourse is based, at its core, on the understanding of language as a resource and commodity which can be exchanged in a globalised market that values linguistic capital (ibid). In other words, within what Duchêne and Heller (2012) term a “discourse of profit” which propagates the neoliberal belief that “English is essential for individual and national economic success” (Kubota 2015:22; see also Park 2011). Constructed as such, the problem of social inequality appears “ostensibly easily rectifiable” (Proctor 2014:307) – language training can provide one with the necessary capital to exchange for further economic, cultural and symbolic capital, and thus leads to social mobility.

6.2.2 English means educated
Of course, economic capital was not the only reason given for student investment in English. Most – although some more than others – understood that what English could fundamentally bring them, if not economic capital, was cultural capital. To be sure, the connections made between economic and cultural capital are clear, as it is the conflation of English with education that
appears to justify it as a pre-requisite for jobs. As Amir, the facilitator, explained to me:

See... in our country/education system plus English goes/ you know/ works together right/ so if you're/ the more you are educated the more English-wise also you will be/ you know literate/ so you know it's quite (claps his hands together) works together.

In fact, English did not only index education, but rather ‘good’ education. This became particularly salient at a training day I observed for new facilitators at the NGO headquarters. The session was led by an experienced facilitator with around 15 newly appointed facilitators who were due to be assigned a centre, and were each practising leading a session. This particular session required students to think about their own education trajectories, and it began with a ‘warmer’ question: “How well do Indian schools prepare students for exams?” A lively debate ensued, with many students reproducing a discourse that was also present in the centre I worked with – that of the failure of government schools to “prepare us for life” due to their focus on rote-learning and cramming for exams, evidence of what Ramanathan calls “disparaging colonial attitudes about vernacular ways of teaching and learning” (2015:204). Many of the students, who had themselves attended government schools, aired their complaints and, in doing so created a ‘good school/bad school’ dichotomy based on their perceptions of effective or useless pedagogical aims and tools. Towards the end, one young man noted, “See, this situation is summarized by the film Hindi Medium” – in which a poor couple try desperately to get their daughter enrolled in an elite English medium school – and his comment was met with agreement around the circle. While there are certainly parallels to be drawn with the film and the topic of conversation, the initial subject matter had been education, good and bad. English education was not explicitly included, and yet, by making the unprompted comparison with the film, the young trainer-to-be demonstrated just how frequently ‘good education’ is synonymous with ‘English medium’ in India: as Amir implied through the clapping of his hands, they “work together”.

If ‘good’ education is collocated with English-medium education, it is then hardly surprising that students and facilitators make the logical leap to
the conclusion that English speakers are necessarily ‘well’ educated. In fact, so strong is the indexicality of English and educated-ness that it impacts the extent to which non-English speakers could be seen as educated. When I asked if he thought that non-English speaking people in India could be considered ‘educated’, while he did not deny this (indeed, he himself had attended Hindi-medium school), Amir struggled to put his finger on what it was that made English speakers that bit more ‘special’:

Lower background person can be genius or IS officer/it’s not a big deal [...] it’s more like/ you know/ it’s something else/you’re going in different thing right/you can be a good doctor/ you can be all the things but speaking English is sort of different that’s all [...] I don’t know how to explain it but it’s very different right/you can be engineer or other stuff because you’re doing that thing in your own language and you are good because you’re doing in your own language and you’re practising very hard that’s a good thing/ /but speaking English is little different from that ok

We note first of all Amir’s association of non-English speakers and ‘lower background person’ in the way that the latter seems to necessarily imply the former: a ‘lower background person’ does not speak English. Secondly, while he might not be able to put into words exactly why an English-speaking doctor is somehow different to a Hindi-speaking doctor, for example, he is nevertheless shedding light on what many of the students expressed to me as reasons for wanting to learn the language. That is, English competency indexes a type of educated-ness that seems unachievable through other Indian languages (I explore this further in Chapter 8). Returning to the workshop, this discussion sparked a great deal of interest among the students, with many of them expressing frustration at these indexicalities. As the first student explained:

Indian people think that if people don’t/ / if a person don’t know about English so people think that he is illiterate and they don’t want to know about anything/ / but if people/ er person knows English then they don’t/ / er/ they are not going to ask anything/ they are not going to ask about your college degree about your graduation/ / if you knows English then they think
that person is good they are not going to just nowadays people judge in India/ people judge with their English/ if he knows English then it is good

We see here, then, the axis of differentiation (Gal & Irvine 2019) that is created between English and non-English speakers: the former is educated and intelligent, and as such needs no educational qualifications to prove this, their language skills being evidence enough; the latter is illiterate and, depending on who we interpret ‘they’ as referring to, either uninterested in education, or not worthy of being listened to: “they don’t want to know about anything”. We see echoes here of what Proctor refers to as “good jobs” and “hicks” discourses, which “relate lack of English to a lack of intelligence, backwardness, and being perceived as a “hick” or “uncivilized”” (2014:309) even amongst those who do not (or did not) speak English. I return to discussions of civilised-ness and educated-ness in Chapter 8.

6.2.3 English means privilege
Many students protested that the English-speakers-as-well-educated discourse was an unfair “stereotype”, but also acknowledged that it was a deeply rooted one that had material effects that were not only related to work and salary. According to one of the young women, they had recently been recounted an anecdote by a visitor to the branch who had been stopped by police on his motorbike a few weeks before as he was not wearing a helmet (a legal obligation in Delhi). In the story she recounted, the visitor had answered the police officer in English and, consequently, not only was he able to avoid a fine, but he provoked a particular response from the officers: “He said that traffic police said ‘ooh,’ means, you know English, you look from nice high society, so why don’t you [wear your helmet]”. There are several things of note in this retelling. Firstly, the visitor was allegedly able to mobilise his linguistic capital in order to reap the benefit of avoiding a fine. Now, whether or not this story is true – whether the young woman misheard or misremembered it, or whether indeed the visitor to the branch was exaggerating – is in many ways beside the point. The point, rather, is that none of the students were shocked or surprised by this. Secondly, the police officers in the story made an indexical leap – similar to the ones the students complained about – between the visitors’ use of language and his socio-
economic status ("you speak English, you look from nice high society"), which is not only a social judgement, but a moral one too, indicated through his use of the qualifying adjective "nice", and one which implies that the judgement made by the police officers was not done on only his language but also on how he looked. It was, then, probably not only his language competency that ‘saved’ him, but rather a bundle of signifiers, of which his language was one, that indexed him as a “high society” man. Of course, in the retelling of the story, it is only the language that is marked as being a carrier of Bourdieusian capital: the language is disembodied in the discourse, thus contributing to its image as a powerful tool for whoever is in possession, and overlooking the ways in which his presentation, body, movement, dress may have (also) indexed his social standing. Finally, and most crucially, the police then use this assumption to question the man on his lack of a helmet: the implication here is that he, as a “nice high society” man should know better; he should have both the education and the ‘rationality’ to wear a helmet, unlike, as is implied, the uneducated, unruly and careless non-English speakers from whom this behaviour would, in this discourse, be expected. In this way, we can see that the discursive framing of English speakers as differently (or ‘better’) educated encompasses not only notions of intelligence and knowledge, but equally notions of morality and modernity, whereby English speakers are perceived to be “modern citizens of India”, as one student was so keen to share in the group discussion. Indeed, as Lin and Martin argue, the desire for English in many postcolonial contexts is not only tied to attempts to improve their financial situation; English is also seen as part of the modernising ‘package’ (2005:3). In the case of Pakistan, Durrani has also shown that in certain discourses, English is not only “ideologically linked to liberalism and modernity” but also positioned “in opposition to extremism” (2012:40-41) – with Urdu indexing the opposite – and thus is framed as playing a key role in modern citizen-shaping. While Pakistan and India differ in many ways, they do share the same colonial history from which such citizen-making framings of English sprung. To learn English, then, is to join India in its advancement into its modern avatar. I return to questions of English and modernity in Chapter 8.

Such a combination of indexicalities thus constructs a seemingly powerful language – powerful not only in terms of the jobs and salaries that it
can ostensibly be exchanged for, but also for the privileges I was told it bestows indiscriminately on its speakers. At the hostel where I stayed, I spent many evenings chatting with Dev, one of the front-of-house staff. As we saw in Chapter 5, he was often highly critical of the need to learn English in India, arguing, justifiably, that he found it unfair that Indians from vernacular medium schools had to struggle to acquire the language just to get a chance at a decent job. Indeed, having grown up in a poor fishing village in Goa, he knew the struggle personally, and had been given this modest but respectably paid job in an up-market tourist hostel because, as well as having a personable and friendly nature that made him very popular among the guests and thus suitable for the requirements of the hospitality industry, he had a good competency and ease with the language, which he had worked on tirelessly in his late teens in order to acquire a job in a call-centre. Despite his criticisms of the injustices perpetuated by English, he often acknowledged – begrudgingly – that there was no other option, that there was “something about English” that could help you overcome any problem:

If you can speak English in India/ no matter who you are/ what you are/ what background you come from // you are good// just because// and people will take more take you more seriously.

 Constructed as such, English appears as a panacea, capable of putting its speakers on a level footing with one another, despite their racial, religious, class, caste or gendered differences, emphasising once again the discursively disembodied nature of the language. While such narratives have been heavily criticised by a number of scholars (Kubota 2011; Park 2011; Tabiola and Lorente 2017) we see here the persistence of these circulating discourses of English that both transcend and infiltrate the NGO. A further example was recounted to me by Arnav, a bright seventeen-year-old who was always the first to arrive in class and who left long after the others as he stayed around to read books and do extra practice on the centre laptops as, like almost all of the students, he did not have one at home. Despite being extremely motivated in his classes at the NGO (he didn’t miss a single session for the entire duration of my visit), he had struggled at school and failed the 11th grade, much to his parents’ dismay as they had hoped he would one day apply for a civil service
job. His parents had been vocal about their disappointment, but this had, according to Arnav, stopped since he joined these English classes:

Arnav: nowadays er if you don’t know // if you got fail in 12th [grade] // if you got fail in 10th [grade] / it does not matter // if you know English then it’s ok / they will not ask / they will // don’t ask you to anything

Katy: Who’s they

Arnav: You can say anyone / your // even you can say your aunt / your uncle your cousin brother / your brother anyone // if you know English then it’s ok / maybe in our house it’s ok / because I got fail in 11th / after that I joined [NGO] but now I can speak English so now my parents don’t er / don’t say nothing to me (laughs) // they don’t say nothing to me

Arnav thus implies that his acquisition of English now shields him from criticism from his parents – that by enrolling in English classes (and indeed, by demonstrating to his parents that he is taking it seriously), his previous educational failure is no longer an issue. For his parents, he has now corrected any wrongdoings by becoming an English speaker, and they no longer pressure him. While it is impossible for me to know precisely how Arnav’s parents feel about his English skills, what is clear is that Arnav himself has acknowledged that English has provided him with a certain symbolic capital, one which impacts upon the relationship that he has with his own family. This is evidence, to Arnav, of what he hopes will be replicable outside of his family – that is, in different fields; it fuels the discourse that frames English as providing any speaker with a certain degree of power and leverage.

6.3 English, affect and justice

The obvious argument that leads from the above sections is that students seek out English in the hopes of acquiring symbolic capital that they can exchange for further gain in various fields. However, to leave the discussion here would be to overlook an integral part of understanding why students invest in English language learning. To be sure, there are potential material benefits in terms of employment and salary that cannot be ignored (see e.g. Azam et al
2013), even if the rumours that circulate tend to overinflate the potential. And yet, if a good, stable salary was the main reason that students attended the sessions, then why were these two classes filled predominantly with women, many of whom were not allowed to work, or who had their careers tightly planned for them? If some students intended to apply for jobs that did not require much more than a basic level of English, why did they continue to desire the language? To understand this, I argue, it is integral to consider the role of affect, and how emotional relationships to English lead students to engage in practices that seek to redress injustices.

6.3.1 The affective dimensions of English
The critical role of affect became particularly clear to me when comparing the chorus-like reasons for wanting to learn English that the students gave in the workshops, with the very different personal stories they told me in the interviews and informal talks. Of course, this is not to imply that interviews are in any way a privileged form of accessing ‘truth’ (Briggs 1986), but it is certainly possible that the students felt too vulnerable to divulge in personal stories in class, where it would be emotionally less risky to use ‘safe’ answers such as money, jobs or pan-Indian communication, particularly considering that the majority of the stories shared with me in interviews hinged on a deep sense of shame and embarrassment. As several scholars have shown, affective dimensions of subjectivity are not – as they are popularly construed – simply ‘personal’, socially detached responses. Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus highlights what he termed “acquired dispositions, the durable ways of being or doing that are incorporated in bodies” (Bourdieu, 1993:15), which are “deposited in each individual in the form of durable dispositions, such as mental structures” (ibid, emphasis in original). As his explanation of the habitus as that which produces a feeling of ‘out-of-place’ demonstrates, the habitus encompasses not only dispositions and habits, but also emotional responses. Indeed, as Ahmed (2014) writes: “through emotions, the past persists on the surface of bodies”; through emotions “histories stay alive, even when they are not consciously remembered” (ibid:202). As such, a focus on what is “sometimes considered mundane, ineffable, private, and trivial” is crucial if we are to “move beyond an imbalanced focus on macro-structures”, to look at how affect plays a role in producing “important consequences for
cultural and social formations and distinctions” (Park 2015:60). Park draws upon Williams’ (1976) notion of structures of feeling to demonstrate how emotional, subjective relationships to English in South Korea are not superfluous to social structure, but rather are a fundamental part thereof. To use Williams’ terms, structures of feeling can be thought of as:

Characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships; not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. (1976:132, my emphasis)

Rather than being “private, idiosyncratic” (ibid:133), such structures of feeling have historical roots and are part of the processes by which social formations are reproduced and changed, meaning that they are a particularly useful element of analysis for understanding, as Park argues, “how inequalities of English come into being, how they are sustained and reproduced, and how they may be contested and transformed.” (2015:62).

Mohit was a young man in his early twenties when I met him at the NGO. He had been attending the class for six months and was simultaneously studying for a postgraduate degree in a humanities subject via a correspondence course (distance learning). He had completed his undergraduate degree at one of the prominent Delhi universities but, having been educated in Hindi medium, had struggled a great deal to understand the lectures which were all, as is most often the case in higher education in India, in English. He had a confident manner about himself – often dressed very stylishly in a leather-style jacket, trendy sunglasses and colourful trainers. He didn’t appear intimidated when I spoke to him as many of the other students did at first – indeed, he approached me first one morning to introduce himself – and he was quick to take up my request for an interview. What I mean to say by this is that he came across as the type of young man who could hold his own; who was not arrogant – far from it – but who could not be easily unsettled. And so, it was rather surprising for me to listen to the stories he told me about his experiences at university. He recounted a particular incident where he was sitting in the canteen with his new friends at university, trying and failing to join in as they all spoke to one another in English. He remembers
feeling embarrassed as they began to notice his lack of understanding, and cracked jokes about him: “I feel embarrassed at that time and they are joking with me, you don’t know English, how can you survive in this country”. The embarrassment he recalls was not simply one of being unable to follow, which certainly would be familiar to any language learner, but rather, it was what this ‘revealed’ about him: that he was unequipped to survive in his own country, destined to fail, echoing the anxiety noted by Park in South Korea, which is not simply “about insecurities of the job market; it is also a moral anxiety, about the struggle to become a responsible human subject who is wisely managing one’s human capital and potential as an individual” (2015:69). In India, as Ramanathan (2005) has pointed out, this is far from an uncommon experience, as it is often at higher education level where vernacular-medium (VM) educated students first meet their English-medium educated counterparts, and where they realise the full weight of their disadvantage as they try to compete, leading many VM students to drop out. For LaDousa, this meeting often prompts what he terms a “complex”, wherein VM students feel inferior: “students from a Hindi-medium background might fall silent as a result, and students from an English-medium background might be unwilling to take criticism” (2017:86, see also LaDousa 2014). Mohit’s friends on his undergraduate course, he told me, were all Hindi speakers too, and could therefore have easily chosen to speak in Hindi to accommodate him. Indeed, he mentioned that on more than one occasion, he would overhear them switch from Hindi to English as he approached. Whether this was a clear case of bullying, whether the code-switching was less intentional than he had assumed, or whether Mohit had done something to upset members of the group who consequently wanted to exclude him, I cannot know. However, what we can take from Mohit’s story is the way in which English can be mobilised for affective effects: it can become a pawn in symbolic power games that provoke emotional responses which serve to uphold the superiority and power of those who have mastered the language, and reinforce feelings of inferiority among those with a weaker competency. And there are material effects to this mobilisation of negative affect: while Mohit did not leave his undergraduate course, I often wondered if his upsetting experiences were what led him to opt for a correspondence course for his post-graduate degree, which he could complete with minimal interaction with other students. He
has thus been coerced into opting for a course that holds less cultural capital, and which does not allow him to create as easily as a face-to-face course would those friendships and academic networks that could make a real difference to his future prospects.

Such affective effects of course can range from the (emotionally) damaging to the light-hearted, and Mohit seemed to be aware of the power of this, as he told me how he teases his mother occasionally by speaking to her in English – a language she does not speak – “just to make fun”. The effect here, however, is markedly different to the effect produced upon Mohit when teased by his English-medium peers, most likely because, firstly, in the context of the close relationship that Mohit shares with his mother, such an act is framed as playful, rather than as an explicit attempt to hurt or shame, but also because the potential shame that his Mother may have felt for not speaking English appears to be overcome by her pride in her son. While Mohit’s teasing is evidence once again of the ability to use English competency to provoke emotional responses, it is relatively harmless as it serves as a reminder to his mother that Mohit is now “an education person”. In this sense, then, the pride that English can bring is not only limited to the person who speaks it but often to their family – and sometimes even community – too.

We can see thus the emergence of an axis of differentiation of shame and pride attached to one’s knowledge of English. Importantly, this deep sense of shame surrounding lack of ability to speak English was not only personal, but also one that was also entrenched within the way Mohit’s community was positioned. That is, part of the stigma attached to his caste – he belongs to the same agrarian caste as the majority of the students in the branch – was the negative portrayal of this community as unintelligent and uneducated. Mohit was highly aware of how his community is perceived: “they think [our caste is] backward [...] they think cheap, they don’t know how can we speak [English], how can we survive or how can we be educated, like not gentlemen”. This indexicality works dialectically, as his caste status implies a poor level of (English) education and, at the same time, his apparently ‘poor’ English is indexical of his caste (and class) status. So much so, he reports, that his old university acquaintances today are surprised to see that he can now speak competently: “they’re surprised, how can you speak English better than us? They’re surprised very very much”, he told me,
laughing. We see, then, that the stigmatisation of Mohit’s caste feeds his desire to learn English. As we ended our first interview, Mohit told me of his intentions to join the police force, and how English was required to pass the entrance exam. “So you joined [the NGO] just for job reasons?” I asked. He paused for a moment, and replied: “job and er, I will give answer who are insulting me at that time. I will give answer when I- when my English will be good I will answer that.” He seeks to prove himself to be a competent English speaker, and thus prove himself to be of value, regardless of his caste status.

6.3.2 English and justice

This theme of proving people wrong was a dominant one throughout the interviews, with several students recounting how they felt that, by learning English, they had gone against societal expectations – of their religion, their rurality, their gender, their caste, their class – and were understandably proud. For Anjali, this was not only a case of proving people wrong, but of making up for injustice. A married mother with young children, Anjali had fought ruthlessly for her right to attend these classes. Living with rather conservative in-laws, she was not allowed to work or engage in further education (even though, as she remarked bitterly, her Bachelors degree was one of the reasons why her husband’s family had agreed to their marriage to begin with). Since moving to Delhi for her husband’s work, she now lived away from the in-laws and had more freedom and – importantly – support from her husband, which meant she was able to join the NGO. This was not without difficulty, however, as when the in-laws visited (frequently), she had to create stories to excuse her absence from the house for two hours each morning. Attending the NGO was a constant battle for her, and her attendance often suffered. And yet, she was extremely enthusiastic, with a clear appetite for learning, or as she described, a “craziness about me inside that has always inspired me to learn, I want to learn English.” This ‘craziness’, she continued, can be located as stemming from a particular part of her life history:

Anjali: I want to learn English because one incident happened with me in my childhood (she smiles, looks down, embarrassed) // because I have 2 brothers, my both brothers go/ going/ got education from convent school and I am in government school // at that time I have a feeling // I don’t share
with my parents/ but I have a feeling inside me that maybe they are doing partiality with me because I am a girl that’s why they got admission [for me] in government and both brother went in convent school/ / they both English was good and my/ I don’t know I only that time I know capital ABCD and that only

Katy: just the alphabet

Anjali: yes and I/ just alphabet and I just write my name that’s it and nothing that else/ / that time I feel inside that/ that time it’s kind of jealous or what (laughs) I don’t know but it make me inspired that one day one day I speak better than them and yeah (laughs) I am better than them and now I am

Katy: (laughs) good/ good for you

She has been fuelled to learn English precisely because she was unfairly denied it as a child while her brothers attended English medium (convent) school. Throughout this testimony and that of many other students, including Mohit, this axis of differentiation of shame/injustice and pride/justice became evident in the ways in which they spoke about their lives before and after English. This draws attention to the affective relationships the students have with the language while also highlighting how these affective relationships are conditioned by their social positioning – as being from a stigmatised caste seen to be uneducated and unintelligent, or as a woman in a patriarchal system and a family who does not place value in educating their daughter. English, then, through its indexical associations that have crystallised throughout its history, is perceived by the students as a way to ‘put right’ or ‘correct’ the injustices and to provide themselves with self-worth.

6.3.3 Challenging through acquisition

As such, one can argue that their acquisition of English is a means of challenging discourses that frame English as only being for certain Indians, as these students go against expectations that are associated with their class, caste and gender by acquiring the language. Rupal, the other facilitator at the branch, was, like Amir, also a graduate of the NGO, and had completed her education in Hindi Medium. Although she was from the ‘highest caste’
(Brahmin), she had grown up in poverty, with her parents working as labourers until her elder sisters were old enough to find work and contribute to the family income. Now, her parents have a small tailoring shop about 2km from the branch. Rupal is the only one of her sisters to have completed school and to have gone to university. She is also the only member of her family who speaks English. This extract is part of a longer answer that she supplied to a question about how English had impacted upon her life. Rupal demonstrates the perceived surprise that others show when they realise that she can speak English at her parents’ shop – a place where her class position is highly marked. She talks about helping her uneducated, non-English speaking parents in their shop, stating:

So my mother quickly she calls me that please come here somebody wants something/ so they ask/ / it’s just a normal thing that they are asking the prices but my parents don’t understand/ they call me and then they/ so over there those people who talk in English they get surprised/ so when I come and I talk to them in English I communicate so/ as they see my parents that they are selling something and then they get surprised that/ oho nice here your daughter is speaking in English

By becoming a competent speaker of English, Rupal is challenging stereotypes associated with her class – a sentiment we have already seen echoed in Mohit’s narrative, although for Mohit the question of class and caste were intricately tied. Not only do Rupal and the students take pride in their claiming of something that they had been structurally denied through schooling, they also challenge intra-national, class- and caste-based discourses of ownership of English simply by believing that they have a right to access it – that English is for them, too. This was further demonstrated at the end of Rupal’s interview, which we had conducted on plastic chairs in the alleyway outside the centre. A small child from the family who lived above the centre – from the same caste as most of the students – had been watching us from the open staircase for a while. At the end of the interview, he grew bolder and began to copy some of the English words we were saying. We laughed, called him over, and Rupal told him, in Hindi, that he too could come and learn English with us one day. His eyes widened as he asked, ‘sach mein? (really)? As we walked back into the centre, Rupal noted, “See, this will make a difference, they will see that
English can be for them. Otherwise they wouldn’t even come to the door”. Of course, one could make the argument that young children can get excited over various ‘unimportant’ things that appear appealing in the moment. However, it is Rupal’s interpretation, rather than the child’s excitement that is more important – she interprets his reaction as evidence of discourses that delineate for whom English is a possibility.

In stating this, I argue that Rupal is pointing to processes of self-selection rooted in the habitus, that is, what Bourdieu describes as “a ‘sense of one’s place’ which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded” (Bourdieu 2010:473). In other words, this ‘sense’ “implies a tacit acceptance of one’s position, a sense of limits (‘that’s not meant for us’) or – what amounts to the same thing – a sense of distances, to be marked and maintained, respected, and expected of others” (Bourdieu 1991:235). As Rupal’s comments imply, students perceive English as either being for them, or as being out of their reach, due to their class or caste positions. This was further demonstrated by a comment from Amir, as we stood outside the centre one day eating pakora and looking over to the day-labourer camp of unstable, corrugated iron housing on a patch of dry land 50 metres from the entrance to the NGO. “See, they are the ones who really need help. But they will not even come to this door. [...] They know it’s not for them”, he says. “They will not come because they have already decided, they already know that education is not for them”.

A few weeks later, when I was observing a training session at the NGO headquarters, a senior trainer had entered the room to observe, and sat behind the circle of trainers, mostly watching, but contributing from time to time. The discussion was particularly thorny, as the participants – facilitators at the end of their first year of teaching – aired their frustrations regarding the high drop-out rate of students, and their attempts to retain students. When one facilitator suggested more stringent entrance criteria (currently, students must be over 15 and only require basic literacy in English and a ‘willingness to learn’ in order to be accepted onto the course), the senior trainer, who had been quietly listening to the development of the conversation, interjected. “Our programme is made for the weakest of the weakest of the weakest. We don’t want to tell them to go away. Our programme is for those who think ‘this is not for me’”. This noble aim is coherent with the vision of the CEO himself,
who launched the NGO as a means to tackle poverty in Delhi, and explicitly targets those who have been denied access to ‘quality’ education. And yet, despite these laudable goals, the programme is struggling to achieve them. The dropout rates remain high, so much so that just before my arrival, the NGO had put in place several new measures to attempt to help students complete the course, including counselling, career guidance sessions, a buddy system and parent-teacher meetings. However, aside from the issue of student retention, another problem was the failure to attract the number of students they had hoped. Towards the end of my stay, the CEO had sent a mass email to all staff regarding the urgent need to fill spaces in classrooms, urging facilitators to consider what they called ‘mobilisation’ tactics, which involved asking students to enrol their friends, requesting drop-out students to re-enrol, putting advertisements in local Hindi-language newspapers, and knocking on doors in target areas. I was sitting with Amir and Rupal having lunch at the branch when they received this email, and they began to quickly brainstorm ways to approach the problem. The discussion grew tense, as they made suggestions and considered the limits of each. Amir sighed loudly and placed his head in his hands as he explained that he had already called two young women who had recently dropped-out and who were unable to return as they had found the walk from their home to the centre down un-lit side roads too dangerous. In my first site visit, I had been surprised to hear from the staff member in charge of improving student enrolment and retention that the NGO was struggling to recruit. They were offering a year of free English training and, given what I had understood as a widespread desire to learn the language, I could not understand why more students were not taking advantage of the programme. The facilitators, of course, understood much better than I did why this problem existed. Many young Delhiites who would perhaps want to learn English were unable to do so for often very material reasons – a dangerous walk to the centre, an unstable financial situation that left them with no spare time to devote to education, the literacy barrier (students must be literate in English to enrol) – and, of course, the possibility that some young Indians simply did not want to learn English. As such, the NGO ends up attracting a certain type of student – one who has at least the financial stability to spare two hours per day for class, one who has had enough education to have acquired basic literacy in English, one who has both
an interest in English and a belief that it can improve their life. This immediately ruled out what the senior trainer had referred to as “the weakest of the weakest of the weakest”. As Amir’s own insights suggest, this can also be understood as a question of habitus – of Bourdieu’s “field of the possibles” (2010:104). For the students who did attend the NGO, their life histories and social positioning were, as I have demonstrated, part of the reason why they were driven to learn English in the first place. For others – those in the camp outside the NGO, for example – perhaps an extra obstacle in addition to the material constraints that stood between them and the NGO was a tacit understanding that, as Amir suggested, “education was not for them”. English for social mobility, then, is a discourse that constructs ideas around precisely for whom social mobility is possible. In the whole time I spent at the NGO, I never once (to my knowledge7) met a Dalit (previously ‘untouchable’) student there. According to the facilitators, there were no Dalits enrolled at the centre (nor had there ever been) – despite scheduled caste groups (the governmental appellation that includes Dalit groups) comprising 5% of the local area. With 8 classes of 20 students, it was statistically odd to have none at all.

For those who did enrol at the NGO, their attendance could be understood, in a sense, as an appropriation of English, as they are challenging their denied access to dominant codes. And this challenge – or the possibility of challenging – shines light on the different ways in which young students in Delhi are positioned to do so within their particular material and discursive conditions. However, by proving their worth via the acquisition of English, they also reproduce problematic discourses that equate English speakers with superiority and thus contribute to the symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1994) that devalues their other languages (I return to this in Chapter 8). Despite this symbolic violence, the self-esteem and pride that the students had in their English-speaking selves was palpable in the centre. They spoke at length of the confidence they now felt – not only a confidence in English, which would be expected as one develops one’s competency in a language, but rather across all aspects of their life. Much like with the students with whom LaDousa (2017) interacted, English made them feel confident in a more

7 Given the widespread, continued stigma attached to being a Dalit, it is not uncommon for Dalits to ‘hide’ their caste in social settings by using a surname that does not indicate their caste status (Deshpande 2011:29). As such, it is possible that I met a student who used a different name for this reason.
general sense, which stems for the most part from a reported newfound respect that they encounter from their peers now that they can speak English: that is, a newfound affective response that they receive from others. I saw this pride in the t-shirts that one of the classes had made for themselves with the NGO logo; in the beaming smiles of the students and their parents at the graduation ceremony at the end of the course; in Anjali’s humorous comment to the class that she will put her framed NGO completion certificate up where her wedding photograph currently hangs at her in-laws’ house. Taking into account these affective dimensions is integral to understanding how inequalities continue to be perpetuated by and through language, as it shines light on processes that lead – at least in part – to certain students desiring the language, thereby reproducing discourses that construct English as a desirable object and at the same time delineating who should and can desire it. Indeed, as Park argues:

Addressing and contesting inequalities of English requires politicization of seemingly personal and mundane feelings regarding English in everyday life, as it is such aspects of subjectivity through which more enduring effects of unequal Englishes are reproduced and naturalized (2015:59).

While many students had certainly joined the NGO in order to be able to understand lectures or to find a more stable, higher paid job – they also provided undoubtedly affective reasons for desiring English: overcoming embarrassment, and shame; enacting ‘revenge’ on those who had hurt them; and growing their self-worth and self-confidence – all of which are inextricably linked to the stigma and injustice they have encountered due to their social positioning. Recall Mohit’s comments from the beginning of the chapter – “without it, we are useless”. Useless can be understood not only in a brutal economic or human capital sense – i.e. of no use to the labour market – but also as deeply affective as it implies a sense of being unvalued as a person, and both aspects are equally important to the process. As Park demonstrates in his analysis of junuk (“a strong sense of inferiority and inadequacy that paralyzes a person confronting a superior or powerful figure” (2015:63) and its relation to English in South Korea, “while it is an actual, bodily feeling, it is also social, not only in the sense that it carries social consequences, but also
in the sense that it is discursively circulated and recognizable as a point of reference for metalinguistic talk about English” (ibid:64). Similarly, what Mohit and Anjali experience is an actual, bodily feeling (embarrassment, jealousy, anger) that, in consequence, drives them to acquire the language that they understand as responsible for the feeling, thus reproducing (“discursively circulating”) the important social weight of English.

6.4 Alternative framings of English

While the preceding sections have demonstrated the multiple ways in which English is constructed as an important and powerful language, this does not mean that such framings go unchallenged. As many political events throughout India’s colonial and postcolonial history have demonstrated (see Chapter 2), English has not been embraced by all, and there continue to be strong waves of resistance today, enacted in particular through the growing Hindutva movement, the albeit decreasing anti-English rhetoric from the BJP (LaDousa 2014), and a “discourse that equates Hindi with the nation” (ibid:91). Bhattacharya (2017b) provides an account of resistance to English through *chutkule* (funny anecdotes) from young boys in an *anathashram* (orphanage) in New Delhi, a resistance that is shaped through “the colonial inheritance of English”, the association of English and “foreign cultural practices”, a perception that English plays a “substitutive, and not additive, role in language acquisition” and “the children’s recognition of the role English plays in elite production within contemporary India”, all of which “may function, therefore, to subdue and subvert that (possibly unattainable?) power [of English] discursively” (p.360-361). As Bhattacharya shows, the continued impact of the colonial past of English has been disputed by scholars and policy-makers in India, who argue that English is now a “language of decolonisation”, or is at least removed from its colonial history (Vaish 2005; see also NCERT 2006). In highlighting the discourse of young boys in an orphanage who reject English as an ‘outsider’ language, Bhattacharya disputes the position laid out in Indian policy documents, arguing that “the sideling of the role of colonization in Indian’s beliefs around English today […] enacts ideological erasure of non-dominant voices” (2017a:8). For Bhattacharya, the NCERT Position Paper’s claims that the colonial history of
English is “forgotten or irrelevant” masks the ideological positionings of her participants, for whom their relationships with English “are undergirded by anxieties about the colonial experience” (ibid:16) as they see the dominance of English as the continued imposition of the colonisers. This ideological erasure, she argues, has the effect of obfuscating the continued role that English plays “in the linguistic and socioeconomic hierarchization of Indian society” (ibid:17). Furthermore, one could argue, such a move is in the interests of the English-speaking Indian elite, as claiming English as a decolonised language distracts away from the fact that many of those holding elite positions are themselves the beneficiaries of colonialism and of English education. We see, thus, that despite easy claims of a ‘decolonised’ language in a ‘decolonised’ country, much like the opening vignette in the introduction demonstrated, there is much disagreement, struggle, and tension under the surface. In the same way, there are multiple struggles and tensions over the need for English in India.

6.4.1 Contesting the importance of English

As would be expected from an ethnographic project which had as its main site an English-teaching institution, there is a great deal of selection bias at work, given that the vast majority of those I interacted with had opted, willingly, to learn English. It is thus difficult for me to access in this way those who, for whatever reason, challenged discourses that attribute importance to English. Nevertheless, there were sporadic instances of discursive resistance to the language both within and beyond the NGO. Dev, my friend at the hostel, often expressed his frustration at being coerced into learning English. More importantly for him, he felt a great deal of anger towards the problems created for those who could not, or chose not to, learn the language. In particular, he told me of the irritation he felt when he saw people in his home village in Goa paying for expensive interpretation and translation services for legal matters that could only be conducted in English. He felt a deep anger at the disadvantaged position non-English speakers were put in, even for simple practical matters. And yet, he recognized that it was not pragmatic – in his view – to eschew the language: “Why do I have to speak this language?” he asked me, in a mock angry tone, “I don’t need this language” – before quickly laughing, and adding, “no no, I do”. His frustration, then, remains just that –
understandably, it has not led to action, as he perceives not only social mobility but also ease of day-to-day life as requiring competency in the language.

This frustration fuelled by the ostensible necessity of English was echoed in discussions that students had about their families’ or relatives’ resistance towards English. Although they themselves expressed a desire for the language, they recognized that at times this was not a sentiment shared by all. In the workshop I led with the class of 17- to 20-year-olds, after a conversation dominated by the positive aspects of learning English, there was one student who raised the argument of generational differences:

These are the positive things but if we see about negativity so // means we can see that the old people which is / means we can say our Grandma Grandpa / they don’t agree with English / they think that why we are learning English / and there are many people who thinks that why we are giving importance to another language, / why don’t we give importance to our own language and why we are learning these all things and why don’t we give importance and / er all the things are there that these are negativity as well

The point raised here by the student draws attention to a rejection of English, understood as an outsider language that reduces the importance given to their “own” language: the ideological framing of language and ethnic, national or regional identity are made clear, as English is mapped onto nation-states, with a refusal to acknowledge English as a legitimate Indian language (see Chapter 5). This draws upon what Park refers to as an ideology of externalisation (2009:26), in which English is the language of the ‘Other’. To embrace English is thus, in this logic, to neglect other languages that are seen to be rooted in one’s identity as an Indian: “close alignment with English can potentially imply a betrayal of one’s identity and a disruption of the social order upon which that identity is based” (ibid). Thus, in the way the students frame the resistance towards English, it is understood not only as relating to generational differences but also as representing a deeper tension between co-existing languages (and thus co-existing ideologies of the nation) in which opting for one necessarily means turning away from the other. However, the other students expressed disagreement with this point, arguing that a shift is occurring in the older generation, who are now coming to realise that English
is “important for the future” and thus are encouraging their children and grandchildren to learn it. The young woman who had first raised the point continued to defend herself, arguing that this may be the case in Delhi, but that in villages, “we can see that there people are not giving importance to English, and they are giving importance to their own language. They’re not—they don’t want to learn another language”. Through this binary between the city (Delhi) and villages, the student draws on discourses that paint the village as unmodern or behind the times. However, once again, several students jumped in to demonstrate that she had ‘misunderstood’:

I want to tell you that if you go any village there are parents always focus that their children will go in English medium and their grandparents also / if you go and you speak in there English they / they will say you please please teach our parents teach our er students / teach our childrens also and they say how you can speak in English please please / they request you and they will say to you

A shift is said to be occurring not only in Delhi but also in “villages”: the grandparents in the narrative move from rejecting a language that they do not see as their own, to embracing this language of “the future”. Focusing on this disagreement thus allows us to identify the differing lines of reasoning that the students draw upon, as well as how certain lines of reasoning are legitimised or delegitimised by the group. Through this disagreement, we see resistance to English discursively framed as a thing of the past, belonging to the old, traditional village, which must be overcome (and indeed, in the narrative, is in the process of overcoming) in order to embrace the modernising imperative. Challenges to the dominant discourse thus find themselves subsumed by discourses of modernisation that thereby delegitimise them as unsuitable for modern India – I return to a discussion of English and modernity in Chapter 8.

6.4.2 Reversing power dynamics?
There was one final instance where resistance to English hegemony emerged – although in a way that proved itself to be far more complex than it first appeared. In my last week in India, I went to the cinema with a Professor I
had befriended and her husband, to see the newly released Hindi film, *Simmba*. The story centres on a corrupt and rather foolish police officer (Simmba), played by the one of the highest earning Bollywood celebrities, Ranveer Singh. Part of the humorous ‘foolishness’ of the character is built through his bumbling attempts to use English, notably through his heavily Indian-accented catchphrase “*mind is [ish] blowing*” (mind-blowing) that, from the laughs generated by the audience in the theatre, seemed to be recognized as a humorous ‘misuse’ of English. However, as the hero of the film that the audience grows to love as he eventually realizes the error of his ways, this appeared less designed as a device to mock the character, and more as a way to encourage empathy and build a connection with the audience. As a predominantly Hindi-language film, it is likely that a large percentage of its intended audience would not themselves have English as a dominant language, if at all, and therefore would perhaps relate to the character’s predicament. Indeed, in certain English-dominant circles that I became privy to at the hostel, there was a certain social stigma attached to watching such popular Bollywood cinema. “They are for the lower classes”, one Delhiite graphic designer told me one evening as we drank beer on the hostel rooftop. He and his friends preferred international cinema, or independent Indian films, he told me, pointing to processes of distinction (Bourdieu 2010) that urban English speakers in Delhi mobilise to distinguish themselves from the ‘lower classes’.

The explicit aiming of this film at non-English speakers became particularly evident when the tables were turned, so to speak, and English speakers became the target of the joke. Towards the beginning of the film, Simmba and his colleagues bust a rave during which illegal activities are taking place. They mount the stage, dance with the DJ, and then pull the plug on the music as the crowd is in full swing, making for a rather dramatic scene. As they stand on the stage addressing the audience, a young Indian man dressed in a smart shirt approaches them to speak, first in Hindi, then, as the camera zooms in closer to him, in English: “Excuse me Sir, *aapne music kyu band kiya* [Why did you turn the music off]? What seems to be the problem?” Simmba appears to not understand what the young man has said in English, and looks towards his colleague, who replies “English-medium”, in a dismissive tone, rolling his eyes. Simmba then voices the young man in a
highly stylised, nasal, nonsensical way ("oh yah wa wa wa ok"), in a clear attempt to mock his speech. He then walks down to speak directly to the young man (kya bola tum? [what did you say?]), addressing him in the informal ‘tum’ (as opposed to the formal ‘aap’ used by the young man), teases him, and slaps him across the face. The intended effect is achieved: the audience roared with laughter.

On a first reading, one could interpret this joke as a means to unsettle the superiority of highly educated English speakers in India. Rather than being impressed or intimidated by the young man’s English, Simmba frames it as the object of mockery, and the young man is made to appear foolish and pompous. As such, one could argue that it allows non-English speaking members of the audience to indulge in a reversal of the power dynamics that, as I have demonstrated, usually work in favour of those who speak English. And yet, to frame this as a challenging act on the part of the film would be rather disingenuous. Ranveer Singh, the super-star actor playing the role of Simmba, grew up in a wealthy family, and was educated in English before studying at a university in the U.S. The director, Rohit Shetty, reportedly attended one of the oldest private English medium schools in Mumbai. The writers, Yunus Sajawal, Sajid Samji and Farhad Samji, while I was unable to find information on their specific education trajectories, have given several interviews in English. My point here is that those involved in the production of this joke – in which, to a certain extent, they themselves are mocked – continue to remain highly privileged through their wealth, fame, education and competency in English. As such, the joke is more comprehensible from a sociological perspective as an attempt to pander to and placate a particular audience, and thereby drum up popularity. This was certainly successful: the film is the highest grossing film of the director to date, breaking several box-office records, and earning, according to a Bollywood film information site (Simmba Box Office: n.d.), 400.19 crore rupees (around 43 million GBP) worldwide. At best, the film allows frustrations to air through playful mocking of the powerful, but does nothing to unsettle the existing power dynamics in India that privilege English speakers. Indeed, the prominent makers of the film would have nothing to gain, and all to lose, from doing so.
6.5 Conclusion
This chapter has attempted to bring to the forefront the ways in which students in the NGO draw on dominant discourses around English that construct it as a powerful resource. I have sought to demonstrate how the students’ understanding of English is framed by discourses that equate English with wealth, status, and a particular type of modernity-driven education, which allow them to imagine English competency as the indiscriminate key to social mobility for all. Further, I have argued, it is the discursive disembodiment of English from its speakers that allows them to imagine it as a powerful tool that can uplift anyone who uses it. However, a further objective of the chapter has been to draw attention to the affective dimensions of their relationships with English. Their social positionings were shown to impact the ways in which they desired English, which, subsequently, demonstrated how discourses for social mobility in India not only shape how English is perceived, but also who English-for-social-mobility is imagined as possible for. Such understandings, I maintain, can only be observed when affective, embodied and socially-situated relationships to English are taken into account. Through this, we have witnessed the complex circumstances faced by students as they enact symbolic violence upon their other languages in the process of appropriating English and subsequently of claiming social value and self-worth. Finally, through an exploration of alternative framings of the importance of English, I demonstrated how resistance is mediated through discourses of English-for-modernity, and how what could be framed as small acts of resistance in Hindi cinema ultimately prove to be simply outlets for frustration that cannot enact (and arguably, do not really seek to enact) any substantial challenge to underlying power dynamics that perpetuate the social weight of English and its speakers.

The following two chapters explore more deeply two themes that have emerged here. In Chapter 8, I interrogate precisely what the students imagine themselves to gain through speaking English, drawing on notions of modernity and personhood. Before doing this, in the next chapter I turn to the notion of English as a resource for social mobility within the context of the neoliberalisation of education, in order to interrogate how students navigate tensions between the ostensible ‘power’ of English-as-resource and their experiences of social stratification and oppression.
Chapter 7 - Navigating discourses of social mobility

7.1 Introduction

Abdul had been volunteering at another branch for a short while when we first met, during a tea break at the NGO headquarters. Aged in his mid-twenties, he had embarked on this career rather by chance after spending several years feeling disheartened, isolated and depressed. This feeling of desolation stemmed from a variety of factors, most prominently from the tragic death of his sibling in an accident a few years previously, but was compounded too by a deep-seated frustration at what he perceived to be a lack of options for success or social mobility. His mother is illiterate, and his father had been forced to leave school before completing 10th standard due to family difficulties, and they struggled financially throughout Abdul’s youth. As he told me, he had been an average student at school – he had attended several Hindi-medium government schools as his family moved across Delhi – and had opted for a college course that allowed him to study mostly in Hindi (albeit in an informal way as the course was ‘officially’ led in English) as he would have struggled to pass a course conducted entirely in English. His frustration continued throughout college, as he grew more aware of the deep injustices that people like him – from a poor Muslim family – faced in Delhi. He oscillated between a desire to seek real social change, and hopelessness at an insurmountable task. He began to think that his only options for a bright future would be to leave; leaving, however, was far from a straightforward task for someone who lacked the educational and financial credentials to apply for study visas, and, importantly, what he understood to be the language that would grant him access to spaces that could lead him to success – English. Then, one morning, things changed. As he walked down the main road near his house, he spotted an advertisement for the NGO that encouraged passers-by to enrol on its English course: “it was written on that ‘why are you standing outside and thinking? Just come inside and ask’ right,
so I liked that quote”. And so he did precisely that. He took up the NGO’s offer and walked inside to enrol as a student. He felt that he was finally being offered an opportunity: “that gave me, finally, you know, a good option. From here I can do anything, I can actually go anywhere”. And this indeed seems, in some ways, to have transpired for Abdul. In the time since the day he noticed that sign, he excelled as a student at the NGO, so much so that he was offered the opportunity to work as an (unpaid) volunteer in a branch in North Delhi before being recruited after my stay to undergo training to become a facilitator (a role that he is working in today). And yet, as this chapter will show, Abdul’s own reflections on English and social mobility were highly nuanced. Despite his own ‘success story’, despite being aware that learning English has provided him with self-confidence, a relatively stable career within the NGO, and a certain level of respect from those in his community, he remained critical of the extent to which English can be considered a ‘magic key’ to success.

Abdul’s story is particularly poignant. Firstly, we see once again the indexical link between English and success, a discursive shaping of English as a disembodied resource (see Chapter 6) that one can access by attending the NGO and thus can use to turn one’s life around, and one which is promulgated not only by Indians but also by many in scholarly ELT communities and institutions (Graddol’s “English Next India” (2010) is one such example). Secondly, and most importantly for this chapter, we can also see outlines of the shaping of neoliberal subjectivities through the rhetorical question on the NGO advertisement: “why are you standing outside and thinking? Just come inside and ask”. Framed in this way, the interpellated student is encouraged to take responsibility for their own future by entering the NGO and embarking on their own journey to success: their future is in their own hands. Finally, Abdul’s own emotional struggle and oscillation between hope and despair are revealing of the tensions that are negotiated within discourses of social mobility and English in India.

The aim of this chapter is to interrogate more closely these discourses of English for social mobility in India. I will demonstrate not only how these discourses of empowerment are informed by neoliberal discourses that have become increasingly hegemonic in India since the 1990s, but also how they are dialectically negotiated. That is, I will explore how students engage with and
question the logics that underwrite the narrative of English for social mobility given their social status and their own understandings of structural oppression. Using the notion of fluctuating capital, I will draw on the experiences of Rupal, another facilitator, to demonstrate the shifting in value of her English capital across time and space. As such, I argue that, despite being discursively constructed as such (see Chapters 5&6) English is neither inherently nor ubiquitously valuable as the language cannot be separated from its speakers’ positionality within social organisation and relations. Finally, I ask why people such as Abdul and Rupal continue to invest in practices that they, on occasion, perceive to be futile, arguing that such a question can only be answered by looking at how the discourses of social mobility that circulate in the NGO are embedded in larger, national discourses of modernisation that encourage students to frame their oppression in terms of social class rather than caste.

7.2 English, skills and the neoliberalisation of education

The vast majority of the students I interacted with at the NGO hailed from one particular agrarian caste, one which, as described in Chapter 4, suffers a great deal of stigma, although it is rather more complicated than a simple label of “lower” caste. In political terms, the caste has been allocated by the government the status of Other Backward Class, a status reserved for castes deemed to be socially and educationally disadvantaged, though not to the same extent as the ex-untouchable (Dalit) castes, which fall under the category of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Due to their official status of OBC, the students can benefit from reservations for public sector jobs, which have been put in place in an attempt to redress the imbalance perpetuated by the caste system. Yet, as Leela Fernandes (2006) reminds us, since the economic reforms of the 1990s, privatisation has swept the nation, with jobs in the private sector becoming symbolic of the wealthier, prosperous middle classes, leaving many of the aspiring middle classes from ‘lower’ castes lagging behind in public sector jobs that provide lower salaries and much fewer ‘perks’. Thus, while the caste-based reservation system has allowed for some social mobility via the acquisition of (often lower-rung) jobs in the public sector, many of those from so-called ‘lower’ castes are increasingly
demanding access to the cultural and linguistic capital that they perceive to be the key to social mobility (Park 2011; Proctor 2014) and a means to affirm their middle class aspirations (Fernandes 2006; LaDousa 2014). In many ways, the NGO echoes their desires explicitly, presenting itself as a way for disadvantaged students to “break the cycle of poverty” by “assisting [them] on the path to professional jobs” (NGO promotional material).

7.2.1 Empowerment through English and soft skills

In the vision of the NGO as developed by the CEO along with a team of academics and practitioners from India and abroad, there is an emphasis on alleviating the widespread un(der)employment that affects a large number of youth in Delhi. In response to this problem, the NGO has developed what they call a ‘theory of change’ that focuses on five key areas – soft skills, English, lifelong learning, mentorship, and career guidance – that students ostensibly do not gain from the government school system. Underlying this is the implication that English and soft skills, but also the capacity to invest in a constant improvement of the self, are what will allow them to gain stable employment and improve their socioeconomic conditions. This argument is made even clearer in promotional material made by the NGO, which was designed to attract funding and recruit volunteer mentors for the students. In one text, a section dedicated to their values reads, “We believe that people can bootstrap themselves out of poverty”, citing “professional skills, and depth and strength of character”, alongside English, as the means to do so. The NGO also delineates clearly the skills that students can and should acquire from the course, namely: lifelong learning, grit, growth mindset, drive, discipline, perseverance, communication, collaboration, ethics, resilience, self-esteem, adaptability and critical thinking, many of which are the subject of entire lessons.

This ‘theory of change’, which can be found in different organisational documents and promotional material is, however, not only meant as a diagnosis of the causes and possible solutions of underemployment and to act as a body of expertise differentiating the NGOs from public education and legitimitizing their existence. As a powerful rationale, it also acts upon individuals through the mediation of different textual genres (posters, pictures, flyers) that serve the inculcation of values of improvement and
development into people’s minds and guide individuals in their attempt to become both self-responsible and empowered subjects. The walls of the classrooms and textbooks students use in their classes at the NGO are adorned with motivational quotes that (in)directly reference these skills and attributes (“Success is no accident. It is hard work, perseverance, learning, studying, sacrifice and most of all, love of what you are doing or learning to do” – Pele; “Success is the sum of small efforts repeated day in day out”; “Only I can change my life, no one can do it for me”). These textbooks, which have been developed in close collaboration with UK and US based ELT scholars and strongly draw on research from Project-based Learning, International Baccalaureate, Tribes TLC® and the Intrinsic Institute Leadership Development Program, clearly espouse neoliberal rationalities, most notably the principle of the entrepreneurial self, by which students become responsible for their own self-worth and success, which they manage by continually investing in their own human capital, and tirelessly adding ‘skills’ to their repertoire.

In a further example, an A3 sized poster which hangs on the back wall of the centre greeting students as they walked through the front door (Figure 7.1) pictures two young Indian graduates (male and female) in Western-style graduation dress alongside the questions: “Do you want to be a winner? Do you want to earn more money? Do you wish to make your parents proud? Do you wish to see yourself in this photo? Then attend [NGO acronym] class everyday”. This poster suggests a causal link between the regular attendance of the NGO’s classes and individuals’ capacity to gain money, respect and pride. In doing so, the poster mobilises affect – being a winner, making one’s parents proud – in ways that are salient for a young Indian audience for whom parental respect as a value often holds particular weight. Indeed, for many of the students, making their parents proud and providing for them was a frequently cited reason for wanting to
learn English. Further, as we saw in Chapter 6, affect plays an important role in what drives many of the students from stigmatised castes, for example, to seek out a way to address the injustices that they have suffered and find a way to re-define themselves as ‘winners’. Success here is indexed by the western graduation gowns and diploma scrolls held by the students, which conjure images of elite international and Indian degree-conferring institutions (as opposed to the local colleges that the students often attend which tend not to engage in this style of graduation ceremony), thereby embellishing the social weight of the certificate they receive upon completion of the course. The poster thus interpellates (Althusser 1971) its students as agentive selves who can act upon their own lives to achieve success: they too can be like the young Indians in the photograph if they follow the rules. Furthermore, the reminder to “attend class every day” is reminiscent of the explicit objectives of Personality Development courses to remove what are perceived as ‘Indianisms’ such as lax attendance and time-keeping, which are ostensibly incompatible with Western workplace culture (McGuire 2013). A large hand-drawn poster above the entrance asks students as they walk through the door each day “Are you on time?” As such, this poster is an example of not only how neoliberal logics are reproduced by the NGO, but how they are reproduced in ways that are entangled with other, context-specific, pre-existing logics of cultural values and orientalising tropes.

Textual genres such as the presented poster, the promotional material or the motivational slogans are not the only technologies through which the NGO’s theory of change, and the principles of winning, improvement and empowerment it mediates, are circulated. In one of the graduation ceremonies I attended, the CEO delivered a speech to students, in which he congratulated them and encouraged them to continue their learning, before students were sent in small groups for career guidance sessions. During the speech, he uttered the first half of a common Hindi idiom and asked the students to complete it: ‘Jitni chadar ho utna hi pair phailana chahiye’. This translates literally as ‘spread your feet only as much as the sheet allows’ or more idiomatically as ‘do not aspire for more than what you are capable of’. He then promptly told the students to forget this, reminding them they can do anything they put their mind to, and that they should not believe those who say otherwise. In a conversation over lunch afterwards, I asked why he had chosen to say this.
Referring specifically but not only to the caste system, he explained how these students often learn from a young age that they should ‘stay in their lane’. He wants to change this mentality and encourage the students to claim what they deserve which, as the NGO documentation claims, can be done through a combination of English, soft-skills and personality development training.

The analysis of the NGO material as well as the CEO speech at the graduation ceremony echoes in many ways research on similar programmes for the un(der)employed in the UK (Del Percio and Wong 2019), Italy (Del Percio and Van Hoof 2017), Belgium (Van Hoof, Nyssen and Kanobana 2020), and Canada (Allan 2016, 2013), which, as Allan writes, “are less about the specific content or knowledge they provide than about the ability to produce citizens who increase their potential value in an unknowable future by continually investing in their human capital in the present” (2016: 63). It is precisely this ‘unknowable future’ that comprises the danger of this neoliberal ethos. Through their English training, as another poster on the main wall of the classroom demonstrated, students are called upon to “continuously learn”, “embrace change”, “accept responsibility for their failures” and not “blame other (sic) for their failures”, or “criticize” (Figure 7.2). What we see here is the fostering of a culture of self-responsibility which thrusts accountability onto the student, and away from any social barriers to their mobility such as class, caste, race and gender. Importantly, construed in this way, any failure they encounter is due to the individual’s failure to sufficiently adapt and self-invest (Martín Rojo 2018). Students are exhorted to overcome obstacles by being flexible, “constantly changing and continually adapting to variations in market demand by constant self-work or self-improvement” (Martín Rojo 2018:550, 2019) and investment in English is a crucial part of this self-improvement. And yet, while these discourses paint languages with high social capital such as English as a tool to “render their speakers competitive” (ibid:542) on the employment
market, many have demonstrated that investing in English repeatedly fails to see returns (Duchêne 2016), for reasons indissociable from other elements of social stratification such as race and gender (Kubota 2011) and the ever-moving goalposts that delineate ‘good’ English (Park 2011) – as we saw in Chapter 5 – as “commodification applauds only certain language variants” (Martín-Rojo 2018:558). It is for this reason that Tabiola & Lorente frame investment in English in the context of the Philippines as “speculative capital”, as “its goal is not just monetary gain but the appreciation of the student’s human capital, measured primarily in partial estimates and holding no guarantee of future return” (2017:70; Duchêne & Daveluy 2015). Indeed, the students’ ability to ‘cash in’ on their English skills is wholly dependent on those who are in the position of regulating their access to resources, who will judge not only their language skills but also their persona and background (see Chapter 8). In other words, English does not guarantee jobs in a market that is regulated by far more than language; rather, learning English marks students as a self-investing, entrepreneurial self, equipped for the neoliberal workplace.

It is important to note, however, that the discursive shaping of English as an entrepreneurial investment does not work in the same way for all languages. Certainly, one could make the argument that learning any language – be it English or Gujarati, for example – could be understood in the framework of neoliberal self-improvement and entrepreneurship. However, in a conversation with Mohit, it became clear that the ‘hard work’ that one puts in to learn another, less ‘powerful’ language is allocated little value at all – in fact, for Mohit, the idea of applying this logic to a language such as Gujarati is laughable – despite it also requiring time, commitment, and effort:

Katy: see tell me one thing/ so uh you know you said people are impressed because you learnt English that means you/ uh you worked hard/ you spent a long time but uh/ imagine you spent the same amount of time learning Gujarati

Mohit: Gujarati (laughs)
Katy: Imagine yeah ok so you go to coaching/ you go to training/ you learn Gujarati for years and years and years and then you speak perfect Gujarati ok/ / will your boss be impressed

Mohit: maybe not (laughs)

Katy: why not

Mohit: well because maybe they don’t/ / maybe he doesn’t know Gujarati/ and I speak Gujarati and he doesn’t understand

Katy: if he understands would he be impressed

Mohit: if he/ / I don’t think so he impressed/ why are you speaking Gujarati (laughs)

Katy: why is it not the same for Gujarati and English/ / I’m using Gujarati as an example but why are people impressed if you can speak English

Mohit: In Gujarat we are speaking Gujarati so that’s good but in other state we don’t

Katy: so why/ / why is English so much more important than other languages

Mohit: Because (laughs) I don’t know but something English very important in India/ in India we need English/ we must/ we must English/ / without English we doesn’t/ we are nothing/ we’re nothing/ / we’re useless

As Flubacher et al. argue, despite the fact that “the celebratory discourses on ‘language skills’ as a key element to re-gain access and recognition in the workplace directly lead to a generally positive framing of ‘language’ as a good investment” (2018:7), the value allocated to investment in different languages is not equally distributed. Rather, we see that it is not only the process of language learning that is valorised as showing commitment to self-improvement, but instead it is the investment in particular languages – here, and in many cases, English – that, through their symbolic capital, are
discursively packageable as skills and perceived to bestow on its speakers a
certain value, that is, to make them no longer “nothing” or “useless”.

It is important for me to raise a critical point here. The emphasis by the
NGO on encouraging students to take control of their own destiny by
investing in English and soft skills stems, I believe, from a genuine desire to
seek change for those who suffer the brunt of oppressive systems of social
stratification by attempting to encourage a re-allocation of unevenly
distributed capital. As such, this analysis is not intended as a criticism of the
NGO, and certainly not as a devaluation of the deeply committed staff at all
levels. Rather, I aim to shed light on the ways in which the NGO is wound up
in a wider web of educational trends that are not only prevalent in education
in the West, but also across the ELT industry (Allan 2013) and other
educational and training sectors, including those with altruistic motives (Luke
2017), which is unsurprising given the influence of Western academics,
practitioners and educational theory on the design of the course. This does not
mean, of course, that this is a devious master plan, but it is demonstrative of
the tendency for neoliberalism to co-opt emancipatory discourses (Block 2018;
Flores 2017; Gooptu 2013; Inoue 2007). Indeed, these discourses were not
unique to educational spaces – one evening during my fieldwork as I had
dinner in my local Domino’s, a TV screen played what appeared to be a
channel curated by the chain, including interviews with celebrities,
advertisements for films, and music videos. In between, cartoons which
featured trendy-looking young people reminded diners that “success is
simple”, along with several tips on how to be successful, including dedication,
motivation and drive. These discourses were prominent across many English-
dominant spaces (such as Dominos, where menus are solely in English and
the servers use English to greet customers). As such, the NGO is part of a
wider trend that has become deeply entrenched across certain English-
associated parts of Indian society. In other words, what I sketch out is not
unique to the NGO, but rather reflective of a wider shift towards an enterprise
culture in India (Gooptu 2013) and an emphasis on skills training for uplifting
impoverished Indian youth (Nambiar 2013). Nevertheless, as the NGO is the
main site of research for this study, I can only speak to the ways in which this
particular NGO attempts to inculcate within its students a neoliberal
subjectivity in their quest for empowerment. It is to the negotiation of these processes that the next section turns.

7.2.2 Exploring uptake: soft skills and the neoliberal register

While there is a wealth of research that documents neoliberal technologies and the production of neoliberal self (see Allan & McElhinny 2017 for an overview), less attention has been paid to its “uptake” and the conditioning of such uptake (Urla 2019:268). In other words, while it is important to pinpoint the ways in which these discourses are reproduced institutionally, an analysis of how neoliberalism is taken up and negotiated by actors on the ground – that is, the students and facilitators – is fundamental if we are to avoid understanding it as a totalising logic (Bell 2019; De Korne 2017), and if we are to acknowledge the place of agency. This section attempts to address this ‘uptake’, that is, to demonstrate how students engage with and are socialised (or not) into such discourses. To do so, it focuses on one interaction from a classroom observation of a group who were completing the fourth of five books that divide up the programme. In this group, the eight students were all aged between 16 and 20, and predominantly young women, with only one young man. They had all been educated in Hindi-medium government schools, except for one young woman who had studied in the English-medium stream of her government school. The teacher, Rupal, had also been educated in a Hindi-medium government school and was a student at the NGO before undergoing in-house training to become a facilitator. Although she stated that she belonged to the ‘highest’ caste (Brahmin) – as opposed to the majority of students who hailed from the agrarian caste discussed earlier – she had lived a rather difficult life, and had grown up below the poverty line. For her, the NGO had changed the direction of her life, giving her the opportunity to become an English teacher, thereby equipping her with a certain amount of cultural as well as economic capital. It is important to point out here that, while their different caste positions are certainly not irrelevant, in terms of class and educational trajectory she identified more with the students than those in management positions. As such, she is an interesting conduit between the more economically and socially privileged staff at the top who design the curriculum, and the students on the ground who attempt to
negotiate the incongruity between the discourses reproduced by the NGO and their lived experiences of structural oppression.

This interaction occurred during a teaching session entitled ‘lifelong learning’. The students had watched a video before reading a list of questions related to the topic in their textbooks. The video contained clips of interviews with Bill Clinton and the CEO of Microsoft, Satya Nadella, about their own learning experiences, the challenges encountered in these processes and their coping strategies developed to overcome these challenges. Having discussed as a group why lifelong learning is important, and how to ensure they continue once they complete the course, Rupal, the facilitator proceeded to the sixth question: “what in your life or environment can prevent you from learning in the future?” After waiting a few seconds for a response, Rupal adds, “like Riva your marriage can stop you”, prompting laughter from the students. She follows this up with “isn’t it? But should not be”, while another student comments “yes, yes, that is really problem for her”. Passing over this comment from the student, the facilitator reverts back to the original question, asking “Anything? What can stop you learn? Nothing?” Students offer answers such as “in our life fixed mind can stop us to learn”, “narrow mind can stop us to learn new things in our life” which she acknowledges with “good” and “yes”, while another student’s answer “when people do mock about my life that things stop me to learn” receives only a correction of pronunciation (“mock [məʊk] about my life that things stop me to learn”) and grammar (“that thing can stop me to learn”).

There are several salient points to highlight in this interaction. First, the teacher and students demonstrate an understanding of the type of answers that are expected from this question or, in other words, of the appropriate skills register. Here, and in the following part of the lesson, students offer neoliberal buzzwords such as ‘fixed mindset’ or ‘narrow mind’ (as the antithesis of ‘growth mindset’ and ‘open mind’) that place emphasis on individual rather than societal barriers, and they are validated by the teacher in her responses with ‘good’, ‘yes’. We can understand these as a set of keywords (Williams 1976) that are essential for students hoping to access professional jobs. Through these, students are thereby exhorted to envision themselves as “bundles of skills” to enhance their competitive edge on the job market (Urciuoli 2008). Urciuoli argues that these ‘soft skills’ are semantically
vague, in that their meanings can shift according to the different ways in which they ‘cluster’ (ibid). When used together, she writes, “particular elements of meaning collectively emerge” (2008:214), creating thus a new register: a skills register. Importantly, the semantic vagueness of these skills keywords – that is, the way in which their denotational meaning can often be ambiguous – allows them to act as “strategically deployable shifters” and, in turn, allows the user of such registers to index social alignments (ibid). In other words, learning to adopt such a register carries more social than denotational meaning, in that it marks one as a particular type of worker, successfully adapted to the demands of the neoliberal, corporate workplace. Yet, as Urciuoli writes in a more recent paper, the term ‘pseudo register’ is perhaps more apt, in that the students are not so much demonstrating the skills they refer to, but simply pointing to them. This does not, of course, make the pseudo-register any less important: they ‘mark’ themselves as ‘good’ students nonetheless simply by paying “lip service” and, crucially, they also contribute to the institution’s branding as a place that claims to produce a certain type of student (2019:92).

Secondly, and more important to this analysis, the fact that there are set answers to this question is made clear at the beginning where the teacher ‘breaks out’ of the register by providing an unexpected, humorous answer. After waiting a few seconds for a response to the question of what could prevent the students from learning, she says, “like Riva your marriage can stop you” which provokes laughter (there had been a running joke for a few weeks about Riva’s impending marriage). Through this comment, Rupal draws attention to a structural barrier that the young women – herself, as an unmarried woman, included – may face if they marry into a family that will not allow them to continue education or work. Indeed, several married women in the NGO – like Anjali, who we met in Chapter 6 – explained that they had to lie or fight with in-laws and husbands to attend class, and another female student had recently married and never returned to class. Rupal’s joke is thus not only a humorous aside; it is a comment on power:

Humor is a vehicle for expressing sentiments that are difficult to communicate publicly or that point to areas of discontent in social life. The meanings behind laughter reveal both the cracks in the system and the
masked or more subtle ways that power is challenged. Humor is one of the fugitive forms of insubordination (Goldstein 2013:5)

However, Rupal quickly follows her ‘jokey’ comment up with “but should not be”– in other words, marriage should not prevent the woman from continuing her education. The speed with which she attempts to move on from her joke is perhaps an indication that she realizes that this utterance is not appropriate for the register expected here, and she signals a transition back to the ‘proper’ register by asking ‘anything?’ (i.e. does any one have any ‘real’ answers to the question), thereby disqualifying her previous comment as a legitimate answer, and closing down a potentially fruitful conversation that could have followed from the first student’s response: ‘yes yes, that is really problem for her’, in which their shared struggle as young women could have provided an important space for mutual support. Indeed, at times they were able to create such a space, particularly in the session attended only by women, in which they shared grievances about husbands, in-laws and wider systemic issues that constrained their agency. However, while it is certainly important that these women were able to create such a supportive community space, the conversations usually ended with the same call to arms: as women, it is their own individual responsibility to fight harder to be able to attend the classes. As one senior trainer remarked to me over lunch one day when I asked him about the barriers many women faced, “those who drop out just aren’t trying hard enough”.

Finally, we can see evidence that one student also ‘strays’ from the acceptable register by pointing to elements of social judgment beyond her control that could prevent her from learning (“when people… do mock about my life that things stop me to learn”). Rather than un-critically accepting responsibility for potential future failure, the student flags up the role that social stigma (Goffman 1986) could play in preventing her future success. In doing so, she draws attention to what Gershon and LaDousa term the “fissures” in neoliberal logic (2019) or, the tensions and clashes between neoliberal principles of choice and freedom and other understandings of the social world which, in this case, are linked to the caste system as well as patriarchal ideologies. However, again, rather than this becoming a point for discussion, it is regarded as an inappropriate answer. Her response does not
receive validation in the form of ‘good’ or ‘yes’ from the teacher; she is simply corrected on her pronunciation and grammar, and the teacher moves on, stating, “ok, one more answer”.

On the one hand, then, one can see how the keywords discussed above which are present in the NGO’s promotional material and curriculum become part of a skills (pseudo)-register (Urciuoli 2008:2019) that the students learn to adopt in class. As such, by learning and adopting this skills register, students are able to align themselves with the image of the ‘good’ neoliberal student who will work hard to achieve success. When they speak out of this register, as was the case for the teacher and one of the students in this extract, their comments are either framed as being irrelevant to the ‘actual’ discussion, or almost completely ignored. Alternative discussions that are not compatible with the neoliberal rationalities have no place in the classroom, thus demonstrating how language plays “a key role for the everyday doing” of this form of governmentality (Del Percio & Wong 2019:192-3). On the other hand, to learn to successfully perform a register does not mean that one necessarily endorses or submits entirely to it (ibid; Upadhya 2013). On the contrary, we have just seen how members of the NGO are aware of the tensions that arise when the logic put into practice contradicts their experience of social obstacles. In other words, they navigate the tensions between a multiplicity of logics working simultaneously. The classroom may not have provided the appropriate environment to delve deeper into these contradictions, but this does not mean that they went unnoticed. In the next section, I examine in more detail the ways in which those who are targeted as the beneficiaries of such projects of change marry up such discourses with their lived experiences.

7.3 Contesting neoliberal logic
While the interactions in class delineate the ‘contours’ of the acceptable neoliberal register, there were, as we have seen, fleeting moments where students and staff alike drew attention to how this mode of reasoning about oneself and about one’s place in society stands in tension with other models of selfhood and society affecting students in their everyday lives. Interestingly, these ‘fleeting’ moments in class were contrasted with much more developed discussions in the interviews. Rupal, for example, talked at
length of her limited control over her future. As an unmarried woman whose parents are in the process of finding her a husband, she is “not sure” whether her future husband’s family “will allow [her] or not” to continue working. She is thus acutely aware of the gendered barrier to her future success and has adopted strategies to retain some independence. By becoming a teacher, she can hope to keep her job as it would allow her to return home by the early afternoon for housework and, if she is not allowed to work outside the home, she plans to offer tuition services from home in order to be able to support herself: “if I face any problems so/ I don’t need to see anybody’s face that/ can somebody feed me”. As such, Rupal demonstrates a keen awareness of the contradictory nature of the multiple logics at play, in particular how the neoliberal discourses clash with her understanding of social barriers, and she tempers her hope in ways that allow her to exercise agency within the confines of a patriarchal system. In what follows, I examine interactions with the participants in which they recurrently raised issues with neoliberal discourses that frame English as the route to success for any and everyone.

7.3.1 “A rat is still a rat”
Abdul, the NGO graduate and volunteer at another branch who I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, was equally cognisant of these co-existing but diverging logics. Abdul was a young Muslim man from a poor family, and had witnessed first-hand the social and economic barriers to prosperity. In the interviews, he offered scathing analyses of oppression in India. The following extract is taken from an interview where we had been discussing unequal access to English, and the gatekeeping practices of elite institutions. Following a question about whether he thought ‘poor’ students in elite higher education institutes risked encountering judgement from other students, he replied:

Abdul: no no actually it’s actually/ it shows you know really good thing also/ if you’re coming from poor family and then you’re/ then you did some really hard work so we respect that also right/ so its not like that we/ ok er it was/ yes we can say in some/ see/ here you’re no/ see/ first we can/ if you’re talking about/ means language/ so let’s talk about language/ if we’re going something else/ like caste system and religion/ that’s separate thing
Katy: *han* [yes]

Abdul: right of course that time discrimination happens doesn't matter you speak English or what right ok still you are from lower class and all but this is good thing/ that you are coming from that class/ still you can speak in/ English/ that’s a good thing

[section omitted]

Abdul: so it’s just that’s why I said that it’s separate it’s / I just want to you know/ put it/ you know/ aside both things are completely different so with/ if you go with the mentality of that community and that caste system and all so we feel that/ / doesn’t matter whatever you do/ how well you speak in English still you belong from the same community right/ it’s like it’s like you know a race of rat I think it’s very famous race of er rat and tiger/ / doesn’t matter rat wins or not still it’s a rat right/ and tiger is always tiger / right doesn’t matter who wins or not who cares

There are clear traces of neoliberal rationalities in the way he moralises hard work, stating that “we respect” those who work hard to pull themselves out of poverty. In doing this, he draws on the trope of the ‘good’ poor person who works strenuously to beat the odds. Many stories of this type were shared in the NGO and more widely in the media, with newspaper articles about the sons (always sons) of rickshaw drivers gaining entry to India’s most prestigious engineering colleges being used as discussion points at the beginning of class. The message from such narratives is clear: if he can, you can – no excuses\(^\text{10}\). And yet, the self-contradiction is overlooked: if such a feat were so easy and normal, then it would not be noteworthy.

Immediately after mobilising this discourse, however, we see Abdul stumble as he tries to coalesce this narrative with his sociological observations. He stutters, leaving sentences unfinished as he tries to form a coherent line of thought with two very contradictory logics: (neo)liberal work ethic, and structural oppression. In contrast to his initial comments about the praiseworthiness of working hard, his cutting remarks at the end of the extract

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\(^{10}\) These narratives are also evident in Bollywood films (Gooptu 2013; Chakravarti 2013); see also Park (2010) for media discourses of elite ‘success stories’ in South Korea.
paint a rather bleak picture of a society in which attempts to garner cultural or linguistic capital are futile: “doesn’t matter rat wins or not still it’s a rat right”. Through this, we see Abdul construct two very different worldviews which co-exist in the very same narrative, the first being more aligned with the ethos that hard work, skill acquisition and English can lead to success, while the second points to the ‘rules of the game’ that are rigged in favour of certain communities. Much like for Nisbett’s participants who cited “nepotism, connections [...] corruption and the perceived power of social capital” (2013:186) as evidence of bias in the labour market, Abdul also “challenge[s] the inherent image of entrepreneurial meritocracy” (ibid), by naming elements of unequal social organisation (specifically, here, religion and caste).

In further conversations, Abdul frequently oscillated between the two, often contradicting himself and never fully explaining how these two ‘mentalities’ are ‘separate’. While ideological contradictions are certainly common, to keep them separate analytically is perhaps the only way to retain hope, particularly given the shocking way in which he refers to structural issues of social stratification by insinuating that certain communities are viewed as ‘rats’. As a Muslim man in a climate of growing Hindu nationalism and violence towards Muslims (Santhosh 2015; Vicziany 2015), he is keenly aware of the reality of living in a marginalised position. Indeed, in early 2020, the highly polemical Citizen Amendment Act, which is being widely perceived as an anti-Muslim law, sparked mass student protests which resulted in police violence across the country, and most prominently in Delhi where Muslim areas and citizens were devastated by the attacks.

Abdul’s comments, while they are at times confusing, are reminiscent of those made by participants in Allan’s study of similar programmes in Canada, which question their efficacy, as the programmes “failed to consider how immigrants embodied the “Other” to many employers” and thus were unrealistic as “by virtue of being marked as foreign or racialized, their skills and credentials were a priori devalued” (Allan 2016:627). Although this study is not about immigrants but rather disenfranchised citizens, if we replace “foreign” and “racialised”, with Muslim or ‘low’ caste, one can see sharp parallels with Abdul’s viewpoint. As Allan argues, such comments also shed light on the ways in which these programmes demonstrate “a liberal
colorblind democratic approach to the labour market which [fail] to take into account the ways in which it [is] deeply discriminatory” (ibid). Similarly, by opting for an explicitly ‘bootstrap’ approach to empowerment, those responsible for designing and managing the curriculum at the NGO appear to underestimate the structural discrimination that many of the students are likely to encounter. Interestingly, however, the facilitators and volunteers – who, as mentioned above, act in many ways as conduits between management and the students – retain varying levels of awareness of and criticality towards these discourses. It is, perhaps, precisely this go-between position that renders the contradiction all the more confusing and thus results in incoherent explanations or low-key resistance in the form of ‘jokey’ asides.

7.3.2 Fluctuating capital
Rupal’s joke about one young woman’s arranged marriage was not the only instance in which she (indirectly) questioned the ostensibly straightforward discourse of success through investment in English. Indeed, in the interviews, she demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the ‘slippery’ nature of English capital, or, rather, how its value was contingent on multiple social factors. Indeed, the students’ competency in English is a source of pride and prestige for them back in their villages, or in their communities, surrounded by non-English speakers. At university, however, surrounded by upper class, English-medium educated students, they are mocked, as their level of competency in English loses value in that particular space. In this sense, then, English is not a homogenous entity with inherent, stable value. In his ethnography of schools in Varanasi, LaDousa (2014) argues that the value of English as linguistic capital is dependent on the individual ‘markets’ which form through differing class aspirations. In middle class markets, the competition plays out between English and Hindi, with their respective indexicalities of mobility and stability; in elite markets, value is not only attributed to ‘English’ in a general sense, but rather to the right sort of English – one free of Hindi elements.

This is further complicated by the ways in which the linguistic capital of English not only fluctuates in value and convertibility across different ‘fields’, but also how speaking English can occasionally backfire. Rupal spoke to me at length of the benefits of speaking English for her. As a young woman
of marriageable age, she is aware that her English capital can be deployed to negotiate a ‘better’ husband. She explained how her parents refused an offer of marriage on her behalf because the suitor did not speak English:

He didn’t know English and he was just 12th pass and I knew English and I was graduated but he was at the same age of mine/ so when they asked/ my father told no my daughter is an English teacher/ so they [Rupal’s parents] denied by themselves.

English and her education confer to Rupal a privileged status, and this capital can be used as a card to play when seeking a partner in an arranged marriage. Indeed, as Chatterjee and Schluter note, language plays a key role for women in upward mobility through marriage in India, particularly when women are lacking in other “concrete skills and activities that are exchanged for material profit” (2020:74). In context of Kolkata in South India, where the “strong influence of gender roles that link women with household duties further diminishes the likelihood of women’s social mobility in Kolkata through an earned income” (ibid), they argue that such a practice of marriage as a form of social mobility for women is widespread, and is thus one of the ways in which English as symbolic capital can become a “powerful resource” (ibid).

However, shortly after this comment, Rupal points to how this capital is unstable when it meets ideologies of gender. She describes the reaction of another man’s parents, who did not agree to her marriage with their son, precisely because she speaks English. She reformulates their refusal, stating:

They said er like no/ she is so educated/ our son will be under her only/ because she knows English and er she is educated/ so she will like she will control my son like/ she will not allow him to do anything else/ she will like order.

Here, her English capital loses its leverage. This does not mean that speaking English has no value in this space. Quite the opposite – superiority is granted to Rupal as an English speaker through the process of fractal recursivity (Irvine and Gal 2000), by which the indexical relationship of English-speaking classes and superiority at a national level is reproduced and repeated, positioning her as superior within her particular social class. This poses a
threat to her non-English speaking suitor: the threat of him losing face if his wife has the upper hand. With the indexicality of English speakers as modern and highly educated (see Chapters 6&8), Rupal is positioned as a woman who may refuse to follow patriarchal norms, and thus as a potentially controlling or un-submissive wife. The rejection reflects how, for some Indians, English is not a celebrated torchbearer of progress, but rather “a carrier of moral decay” (Hall 2019:498) that poses a threat to ‘tradition’ (and, here most explicitly, to ‘traditional’ expectations of womanhood). This has produced real, material problems for Rupal, which demonstrates the ongoing tensions over what modernity means to the heterogeneous Indian middle classes, with their conflicting interests, values and visions for the Indian nation, and how this is embedded within language.

The payoff of speaking English, then, contains its own risks, risks that can only be understood when we take into account not only the language, but also the speaker. Her capital, then, is not only speculative, but also fluctuating: it gains and loses value across time and space as it intersects and clashes with other discourses – particularly, here, patriarchal discourses of what constitutes a ‘good’ wife. Much like the case of Arabic in Hassemer and Garrido’s study, the indexicalities attributed to English and English speakers “encompass cultural and professional values with both positive and negative symbolic and material consequences that go beyond straightforward capital conversion” (2020:138). By speaking English, Rupal risks potential rejection from her own community, which resonates with the anxieties also shared by the students that they would be chastised by their friends or family members for speaking English. Much like for Chidsey’s participants, the use of English – especially certain types of English – is perceived by some “as merely a way to show off and claim false status” (2018:44; Nakassis 2016), which can lead to bullying or rejection from one’s community. Thus, we see the ostensibly straightforward discursive construction of English as capital unravel as its speakers, with their own social positionings and life trajectories, attempt to put it into practice, and are forced to negotiate its shifting value, its “enabling and hindering potential” (Hassemer & Garrido 2020:157). English, then, contrary to what we saw in Chapter 6, proves itself to be far from disembodied – its value depends not only on the context but also on the speaker.
This notion of fluctuating capital became particularly salient in an interaction I observed one morning. The class, attended only by women, had been discussing how to practise their English at home. Divya, a young divorcee who had returned from her marital home with her two children to live with her mother, found speaking English particularly difficult. She ran a small shop with her mother, and was in quite dire financial difficulty, as the two were responsible for supporting the family since her father was no longer present (the reasons for which I remain unaware of) and her only sibling, her elder brother, had a chronic illness. She had joined the NGO in an attempt to find a more stable job for herself, but with the shop and two children to care for, and nobody at home to help her with her learning, she struggled to make progress. Nevertheless, she remained determined, and often looked for ways to practise. That day in class, she proudly recounted to the other women how a young man had come into her shop and she had overheard him speaking in English on the phone. They struck up a conversation, and she gave him her phone number so that he could help her practice English. As she told the class, she appeared visibly proud of herself. Such a reaction is understandable – as she saw it, she had followed the rules laid out by the NGO, that is, to constantly seek to self-improve, to be motivated, to keep learning.

And yet, judging from her crestfallen face upon the reaction of the other women, she did not get the congratulations or support that she expected. The other women in the class were not impressed. Many shared glances of disapproval with one another, others tutted loudly, some asked her, with concerned looks, why she had offered her number to a man. She was chastised by the other women for behaving in ways that were not appropriate for a young woman. As such, we see once again that these skills or dispositions that ostensibly provide one with capital on the labour market – English competency, lifelong learning, self-improvement – become complicated when they meet ideologies of gender. The young woman had transgressed gender expectations by offering her number to a young man that she barely knew, and thus any ‘value’ that she may have hoped to gain through such actions is ignored. Neoliberal discourses are therefore further complicated by their intersection with pre-existing logics on the ground.

Faced with such instances in which the discourses of social mobility begin to unravel when certain speakers attempt to put them into practice, it is
therefore important to raise the question of why students and staff alike continue to invest in them. Abdul, for example, explicitly expressed the futility of working hard and acquiring the necessary capital when one is often positioned by others in a stigmatised way. Yet, it is important to remember that, while Abdul relates this, he is simultaneously, it seems, investing in the logic and technologies that he questions. Similarly, Rupal continues to pursue it while at the same time acknowledging that her ‘success’ is unlikely to resemble the paths taken by the multi-millionaire CEOs whose pictures and quotes decorate the walls of the classroom. The NGO has undoubtedly provided them with economic and social benefits – they have a salary which is stable and higher than that of their non-English speaking peers, access to further training, potentially enhanced marriage prospects, reported ‘respect’ from friends and ‘pride’ from family, and higher self-esteem. But, at the same time, there remains an awareness that ‘working hard’ will not remove them from their marginalised positions in society, and the ‘benefits’ often entail risks. Thus, neoliberal rationalities, as I have shown, do not systematically produce neoliberal subjects, and programmes that seek to inculcate such subjectivities “do not determine the actions or thinking of the participating subjects” (Del Percio & Wong 2019: 192). Rather, the logic is “mobilized, rationalized and dialectically engaged with on the ground” by subjects who question the logic and the effectiveness of such programmes (ibid). Why, then, despite their questioning, do they continue to seemingly invest in the discourse of social mobility through English?

7.3 Shifting social framings of oppression
To attempt to answer the above question, one must interrogate the wider processes in India that shape common understandings of oppression and social mobility. As I will seek to illustrate, the discourses mobilised in the NGO seem to be embedded in a wider agenda that maps social mobility along social class lines, while other hierarchies such as caste are ideologically erased (Irvine and Gal 2000) from the discussion, unsuitable for a modern India where social mobility is imagined as eminently possible through the acquisition of English and education.
7.3.1 Mobility as a class issue

The previous sections attempted to bring to light how the NGO is premised on neoliberal ideals of the entrepreneurial self, where hard work, growth mindset and lifelong learning – coupled with a certain idea of English competency – are seen to be the antidote to unemployment. While terms such as ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘underprivileged’ pepper NGO documentation, discussions tend to focus on poverty and unemployment – with no explicit reference to issues of caste, gender or religion. Indeed, within the NGO the caste system was conspicuous by its apparent absence. In a meeting with a senior manager in my first week in Delhi, I asked if students’ castes were recorded at enrolment. He shook his head profusely, with eyes wide open, and I felt acutely embarrassed for asking such a question. Enrolment records were kept, however, on parental education, parental employment and the student’s own educational and employment history. Pinned to the classroom wall, a printed list of the branch’s expectations reminded facilitators and students to speak in full sentences, to organize the wall displays, and so on, while expectation number 31 read: ‘No religious or political displays or discussions are allowed inside the center’. This was a space where caste had no place; where class was acknowledged as a socio-economic category, but considered a stumbling block that could be overcome through acquiring English and a range of skills and dispositions that would ostensibly prepare students for the job market and to make claims to middle class status.

These class-focused understandings emerged not because caste had disappeared. On the contrary, caste was ever-present. As I described in Chapter 4, outside the branch, the name of the most populous caste in the area and of most students at the branch – a caste routinely stigmatised for being uneducated, thuggish and violent – appeared on several car windows, sometimes accompanied by a silhouetted image of a burly man holding a baseball bat alongside the words ‘Last Warning’ – the implication being that one should not cross these people. There were also, as mentioned, rumours of Dominos pizza boys being too afraid to deliver to the area because of the reputation of this caste. And, of course, back inside the walls of the NGO, many students carried their caste with them in their surnames. They carried this with them into university, too, where they often reported being mocked both for their English and for their caste status simultaneously. As we saw in
Chapter 6, Mohit, the university student, described how at university, “they think [our caste is] backward... they think cheap, they don’t know how can we speak [English], how can we survive or how can we be educated, like not gentlemen”. Their apparently ‘poor’ English is indexical of their stigmatised caste status – and vice versa – and, as we saw in Chapter 6, he reported that many of his fellow university students were surprised to see that he could now speak English competently.

I was struck by the fact that, after explaining this to me, Mohit paused for a second, before saying: “They think [this] about our class”, before referencing “poor people”. Although our conversation had been centred predominantly on caste, it seemed that, in my interpretation at least, by the time he reached the end of this thought, he had elected to frame it as a class position (“poor people”), rather than an explicit caste position. This shifting from one social frame to another was not infrequent in my discussions with the students. It is, furthermore, entirely understandable given the overlapping nature of the two systems (see Chapter 2). However, my interest here is not only in how the two overlap and are interwoven in complex ways, but equally in how one or the other gains prominence at particular socio-historical moments; how and why students and teachers alike at the NGO drew on each of these two frameworks to make sense of their struggles. Why caste, here and now? Why class, here and now? As I expand upon in the next section, discussions of class came to the forefront in the wake of independence as India embarked upon a mission of economic development and modernization in the Nehruvian era, during which time it was hoped that oppressive, traditional structures would eventually succumb to the modernizing project (Deliège 2011; Subramanian 2019). Caste, it was believed, had no place in modern India, a renewed nation and site where social mobility – ostensibly impossible in the traditional caste system – ought to be possible. While in practice such an ambition has arguably not been realized, as Van Wessel has highlighted, “modernity as an ontological paradigm has considerable legitimacy and even prestige among members of the [Indian] middle class” (Van Wessel 2011:104). Indeed, as I chatted with Abdul one day, he praised ‘rich people’ for their rationality with regard to such discussions:
Rich people at some level they are still smart/ they don’t even/ you know/ talk about religion things// I have met many rich people and I have noticed that they are very// what do you call/ rational about all those things

For Abdul, it is “us uneducated and poor people” who insist on such identity-based divisions of caste and religion. Through this, he endorses the moral imperative promoted both by the NGO and wider neoliberal class discourses to think ‘rationally’, to rise above ‘identity politics’ and, implicitly, to embrace an ostensibly fairer, modernity-driven class system.

As I will demonstrate, political projects of the nation state have shifted the focus at specific moments in time from questions of caste to class, thus shifting the framing of social inequality itself, and redefining along the way the concepts themselves. Indeed, for Mosse (2020:1225) “the scholarly framing of caste mirrors a public policy ‘enclosure’ of caste in the non-modern realm of religion and ‘caste politics’, while aligning modernity to the caste-erasing market economy”, the effects of which being that caste has “disappear[ed] from view within certain discursive fields” (ibid:1226). It is important, then, at this point, to interrogate further how the political economy of modern India has shaped these discursive framings. The following section may at first glance appear to be a detour from the issue at hand but, it is one that is crucial because, as we will see, the wider discursive tensions over merit, oppression and affirmative action have noticeable effects on how the students in the NGO come to frame their understandings of their own oppression which, in turn, has consequences on how they understand social mobility to be possible.

7.3.2 Discursive clashes: quotas, reservations and individual merit
As we saw in Chapter 2, quota systems for higher education and public sector jobs were introduced by the Indian government in 1990 under Prime Minister V. P. Singh following the recommendations of the Mandal Commission (although the OBC quota implemented was only at 27%, and not the 52% that the commission had recommended) which had been created in 1979 to address the potential of implementing more quotas and reservations, and had been ignored by previous governments (Jayal 2015). This widening of the quota system to encompass OBCs was the first time that quotas had been extended to those who did not suffer from practices of untouchability, and the new
group “identified the OBCs – mostly middle caste, middle peasant communities– by constructing an index of ‘backwardness’ in which weights were assigned to a wide range of social, educational and economic indicators” (Jayal 2015:122). However, as Jodhka writes:

Notwithstanding these proactive measures initiated by the Indian state, the middle class that inherited power from the British colonial rulers shared the view that caste was essentially a mode of traditional life and would gradually decline and eventually disappear as India moves on the path of development and modernization. The engine of progress was to be the process of economic growth: industrialization, modern technology and urbanization. (2015:248)

What Jodhka sheds light on here is a persisting belief among the middle classes that caste is essentially a thing of the past and will soon become obsolete as the country follows a path of modernisation. Such discourses thus propel a resistance towards measures implemented by the government to provide support to those suffering from caste discrimination. And yet, while caste has certainly changed in terms of its practices and social or political meanings throughout the last century due to *inter alia* the implementation of policy, the political mobilisation of the lower castes, and economic reform, “caste seems to be becoming politically more visible and socially more complex. The caste question today presents itself in newer and more complicated forms.” (ibid:250). Violence, predominantly against Dalits, continues today, Scheduled Castes and Tribes “remain heavily over-represented at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy” (Jayal 2015:121), and more relevant to the students in this study:

The experience of mobility for those located at the lower end of the traditional caste hierarchy, namely their moving out of village and agrarian economy, is also not an easy process. Even those who are able to acquire technical and higher education (generally because of the quotas) find it hard to get into the higher echelons of power in the private sector. (Jodhka 2015:250)

Multiple studies have demonstrated how caste continues to play a crucial role in hiring practices in the corporate sector. As Jodhka and Newman (2007)
found in their interviews with hiring managers in Delhi’s biggest private companies:

Even when they [hiring managers] actively deny any consideration of caste and community in the process of recruitment, they openly showed preference for candidates with specific social and cultural skills [...] They look for ‘suitability’ of the candidate, the social and cultural aspects of their personality. (Jodhka 2015:251)

One important part of this, as almost every interviewee explained, was ‘family background’ and fluent English, the first of which, many noted, “also gave them an idea about their [the candidates’] ‘social origins’” (ibid:251). And so, caste continues to play an important role in allowing or constraining social mobility, even when it is not directly referred to – what M. S. S. Pandian calls “caste by other means” (2002:1735). More importantly, however, despite the explicit admission that candidates are often subject to assessment and judgement in job interviews based on elements pertaining to their caste (albeit indirectly), Jodhka and Newman’s participants disfavoured the quota system – which, one should note, does not exist in the private sector and has been strongly resisted in this domain – citing “merit” as the sole worthy criteria for judging candidates (ibid:252). Meritocracy, as Subramanian writes, “has been upheld as a republican ideal that is a necessary corrective to older hierarchies of status” (2015:318). And yet, “in bracketing out the social and the historical, it has serviced the reproduction of privilege” (ibid:318). Thus, for Subramanian, the claim to merit is an “upper caste strateg[y]”, and “must therefore be seen as part of the effort to secure arenas of expertise and accumulation against lower caste advancement” (2019:277). Meritocracy as a value is so deeply entrenched that it is not only hiring managers who express their distaste for the ostensibly ‘anti-meritocratic’ quota systems: “Many in middle-class urban India would emphatically argue that indeed caste would and should have disappeared from public life by now had it not been kept alive by the wily actors in India’s electoral politics.” (Jodhka 2015:253, see also Uphadya 2011, and Tierney et al 2019 for a discussion of the myth of meritocracy in Indian universities). Those in favour of the quota systems are seen by many in the middle classes as unnecessarily perpetuating caste, with
many believing that there is no longer any need for a system at all, given that, “as the process of development matures under the neo-liberal market regime, caste is bound to disappear on its own, provided it is allowed to be forgotten by political entrepreneurs of Indian democracy” (Jodhka:2015:253). Such ideological resistance to these measures is not new. As Fernandes argues,

The Indian middle classes have historically engaged in a politics aimed at differentiating their socio-cultural identity from subaltern social groups. This dynamic has continued in the contemporary period. Thus, in the context of the economic anxiety, the middle classes have mobilized in different ways in order to preserve their interests. New entrants to middle-class status have pressed the state for access to employment and education while the upper tiers of the middle classes have often engaged in a politics of backlash against state policies such as caste-based reservations (2015:237)

Indeed, reservations have been controversial at various points in India’s postcolonial history, particularly the anti-Mandal protests (Subramanian 2019) sparked by the self-immolation of Rajiv Goswami in protest over the expansion of the reservation system to include ‘other backward classes’ in the early 1990s (which, as we have seen, arrived very shortly before the economic reforms), and the anti-reservation protests led by medical students in Delhi in 2006, both of which saw protesters asserting that the reservation system “undercuts the principle of equality and is antithetical to merit” (Subramanian 2019:286). For Uphadya, the ‘merit’ argument, is “a central plank of the ideology of the new middle class” (2011:185) and is “based on a very partial conception of inequality in Indian society, in which caste is denied but class is in some sense valorised (albeit as a form of social differentiation that is open)” (ibid:186).

Importantly, as Jayal writes, such a framing is not only shared by the ‘upper’ castes. In her paper exploring affirmative action before and after the neoliberal economic reforms, she describes a “split” that has emerged in the last two decades between Dalits who are invested in political mobilisation and thus the quota systems as a means for social mobility and empowerment, and a second more recent strand, “emerging in the context of the liberalization of India’s now largely capitalist economy, and resolutely turning its back on the politics of quotas and the culture of handouts that these are seen to represent”
(2015:119), an example of which, she explains, is the Goddess English temple (Angrezi Devi) built in a village in Uttar Pradesh in 2010. The goddess, it is believed, “will encourage her worshippers to seek the empowerment of their children through learning English, the language of social mobility without which jobs in the liberalized economy will be hard to come by” (ibid:118). These discourses are certainly reminiscent of those reproduced by my participants. The students in the NGO were not unaware of these wider tensions related to the reservations for which they are eligible (OBC quota) through their caste. They spoke at length of their caste-related anxieties, with frequent reference to how they were viewed by teachers and students at university as free-loaders who took advantage of the polemical government quota system that reserves places for socially, economically and educationally ‘backward’ caste groups. And yet, in the day-to-day interactions in the NGO, class – framed as poverty and lack of education – was perceived as their most prominent struggle. What we see here, I argue, is a microcosm of a more general tendency of the Indian middle-class project of modernity. Caste can only be spoken about in specific ways.

This brings us back to a question I posed earlier, one that is fundamental for understanding these forms of stratification in modern-day India and, more specifically, in this NGO. Why caste, here and now? Why class, here and now? What are the political economic conditions that make one, or both, or neither, appear more salient at a particular moment in time and space? There is a clear tension that emerges between the state-supported measures of quota and reservation that seek to uplift the oppressed, and neoliberal discourses that emphasise the importance of individual hard work and reject interference from the state. This is a tension that hinges fundamentally on a clash between understandings of social mobility as a collective pursuit (caste politics) and social mobility as an individual pursuit based on merit ((neo)liberalism). And yet, as Jayal highlights, these clashes do not co-exist with much difficulty, and the fact that more quotas have emerged since the (neoliberal) economic reforms is not as anomalous as it may appear. She cites three dominant reasons why these seemingly contradictory ideological projects occurred simultaneously, noting firstly that in the new economy, elites shifted from the public to the newly lucrative private sector (which remains untouched by reservations), and thus “the expansion of
quotas in public employment was an expedient and politically inexpensive resolution” (2015:123). Secondly, she draws on Kohli’s (2009) argument that the privatisation of the public sector was much less radical in India than elsewhere, and the state was not reduced to the same extent as other countries have seen, due to the continued “rhetoric of inclusive growth” (ibid) (which, as Gupta & Sivaramakrishnan (2011) argue, has not in practice actually affected the poor). Related to this second point, the third reason for continued affirmative action alongside neoliberal reforms emerges from the mass poverty across India, which “no political party seeking election can afford to ignore” (Jayal 2015:123), due to a concern over violent retaliation (Gupta & Sivaramakrishnan 2011).

As such, one can see how “neither the legislation of more quotas nor that of social and economic rights is as inexplicable or contrary to the principles of the market economy as may be supposed” (Jayal 2015:123). Importantly, one can also see how discourses of social mobility through affirmative action emerge within and alongside hegemonic neoliberal discourses as they serve as vectors of “caste abatement’ (ibid), thus pacifying those who suffer caste discrimination while not actually doing much in the way to redress the balance. In Jayal’s words, “these programmes help to maintain the illusion of inclusion” (2015:124). Her analysis throws into sharp relief the relative inefficacy of the quota system, and, in turn, the reasons why the students at the NGO seem to have understood that they cannot look to these measures alone for support, much like the Dalit entrepreneurs that Jayal references in her study, who “eschew collective mobilization in favour of individual effort” and “pronounce the English language as the route to Dalit liberation” (ibid:129). Indeed, as a senior trainer announced to the students one morning in class: “See, right now nobody, nobody is your friend. You have to prove yourself [that] I am the person who speaks the best English, so for proving yourself, trouble other people”. Students were encouraged then to not only seek their own individual success within a framework of fierce competition, but they were also told to “trouble other people”, that is, seek to demonstrate their own merit and ability by actively attempting to attack that of other students.

Jayal’s analysis also highlights how difficult it can be for students such as those in the NGO to defend their claims of structural oppression, when their
arguments are often buffered with the counter-claim that, they, as members of an OBC, already have (‘illegitimate’) access to resources from the state, resources which, in modern India, are discursively constructed as no longer necessary, as hindrances to India’s economic prosperity, and as obstacles to ‘legitimate’ success obtained through ‘merit’, a notion in which the caste status and educational backgrounds of those who have ‘reached the top’ in the private sector is ideologically erased. For Subramanian, “the semantic equivalence between the general, the casteless, and the meritorious reinforces the idea that those who fall within the general category do so, not on the basis of accumulated caste privilege, but by dint of their own merit” (2015:298). This discursive tension thus serves to frame lower caste students’ lack of success as simply a lack of merit: if they have been unable to achieve success despite having been given an ostensible ‘leg-up’ from the state, they must be individually responsible for the failure.

These tensions that play out on a national level were reworked and negotiated inside the NGO. While the NGO claimed to keep such discussions of caste out of the classroom (“No religious or political displays or discussions are allowed inside the center”), this did not prevent caste from being a shaping factor in how students understood and experienced their social positions. What it did do was encourage them to understand their social disadvantage as a socio-economic, individual matter that could be overcome with fluent English and the application of hard work. Of course, the acquisition of legitimised forms of English is certainly a socio-economic issue: without money, expensive private English-medium schools that provide legitimised forms of English are wholly inaccessible to most Indians. Yet, the reasons why these students walked through the door to enrol in the first place are heavily tied to the ways in which they experience both their class and caste. As we saw in Chapter 6, their desire to acquire English is a class and caste project, in that it is directly linked to their attempt to refute their caste image and to perform ‘middle-classness’, but equally because the exclusionary practices of the middle classes cannot be divorced from pre-existing and continuing notions of caste (see Chapter 2). The students and teachers I interacted with thus struggled with this tension between their lived experience of both caste and class stigma, and the modernizing imperative insisted on by the NGO that encourages them to frame their disadvantage in
specific, more palatable ways that result in an illusory optimism: that in a supposedly caste-free class system founded on rational thinking, equal opportunity, and hard work, social mobility through English is entirely possible. Through this, it ensures that there is no encouragement of any form of class mobilisation, by exhorting students to frame class mobility as an entirely individual pursuit. As such, neoliberal discourses flourish as the students are encouraged to understand their oppression in terms of class (as an individual problem), and thus as an oppression that one can ‘work’ oneself out of, regardless of one’s caste, religion or gender.

And yet, the students own observations of structural oppression – be it Anjali and Rupal’s reflections on patriarchal constraints, Abdul’s comments on the difficulty faced by poor Muslims, or Mohit’s acknowledgement that his caste stigma is an obstacle that is difficult to overcome – are testament to the ways in which these neoliberal discourses of social mobility are not blindly accepted nor totally invested in by the students and teachers who nevertheless appear to espouse them. They also point to the tensions that these students try to negotiate, a tension we saw in Abdul’s story at the beginning of the chapter, between a hope for a better future, and despair at the insurmountable obstacles they face through their social positioning. They thus continue to invest in their English learning – be it whole-heartedly or superficially – perhaps as a way to manage such tensions, perhaps because hope is a powerful mobiliser, or perhaps because they simply have very few other resources or options available to them.

The problem remains, of course, that those responsible for designing and organising the NGO curriculum appear to have heavily invested in the bootstrap mentality and the belief in the ability of English, combined with the other skills addressed in this chapter, to provide success to all and any individuals. To acknowledge otherwise would be to throw into question the entire raison d’être of these programmes. On a slightly more cynical note (and one which is not directed at the NGO organisers specifically who, I sincerely believe, are doing what they can to help students who otherwise have very few options), the reproduction of neoliberal discourses that hinge on (an individualised) class (and not caste) mobility is essential for those in power to justify their own privilege. Framed in this way, their own achievements are seen to be predominantly the outcome of their own hard work, grit, self-
investment and so forth, and not of their caste, education, gender, religion or urbanity. The game thus appears easy – or at the very least, open to all players – and those who do not win can only blame themselves.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to interrogate more closely the specific discourses of social mobility that circulate more widely in India and are reproduced and negotiated in the NGO, exploring how they are informed by hegemonic neoliberal discourses that have emerged since the economic reforms of the 1990s and have taken deep root in the decades since. In emphasising the importance of addressing the “uptake” (Urla 2019) of such discourses, this chapter has shed light on their negotiation on the ground, highlighting how students are socialised into neoliberal skills (pseudo)-registers (Urciuoli 2008, 2019). The focus on uptake has also allowed for a nuanced picture of how students both invest in and challenge the neoliberal imperative – that is, how they question the ideological framing of individual success as achievable through hard work alone by raising their own experiences of social stigma or structural oppression, be it related to gender, religion, class or caste. Through the notion of fluctuating capital, I have attempted to demonstrate students’ and facilitators’ acknowledgement that English capital, or the development of a neoliberal self, were not such clear-cut pursuits when combined with, in this instance, dominant patriarchal ideologies of doing/being a woman or wife. The notion of fluctuating capital thus calls into question the discursive framing of English as ‘disembodied’ capital, as the capital that English ostensibly provides is shown to hinge on its speaker, the speaker’s social positioning, and the different spaces in which she moves. Finally, in the face of what reveals itself to be a rather uncertain and risky investment (English and soft skills), I have explored why students and facilitators alike continued nevertheless to invest in these discourses. Raising such questions required tracing the processes through which discourses of modernity in postcolonial India, alongside the rise of hegemonic neoliberal discourses since the economic reforms of the 1990s, have shaped discussions of social mobility, framing them as a class, rather than a caste issue. In turn, students are encouraged to understand their oppression as one of class, and thus as an
obstacle that one as an individual must seek to overcome. Such discourses stand in marked opposition to their experiences of structural oppression, and the ensuing confusion and tension see many students oscillate between hope and despair.

They continue, nevertheless, to pursue English. It is for this reason that the analysis cannot rest here: to do so would be to imply that these students seek out English only as part of a pursuit for success within a neoliberal framework. As we have seen, the students often question such a pursuit, and several of them are highly critical of such discourses. And yet, this critique does not prevent them from desiring English in deeply affective ways, as we saw in Chapter 6. While desire is certainly mobilised within neoliberal discourses, in the next chapter, I will argue that to view this only through a neoliberal lens would be to overlook key components of the processes of inequality, and to ignore other elements of the types of ‘personhood’ that have come to be associated with English, which drive the desire for English in India, and re-signify learning English as not only a linguistic pursuit but also as the acquisition of a whole host of associated cultural capital and performances, that is, as a transformation of the self.
Chapter 8 – Differentiating personhoods: Desiring and performing English speakerhood

8.1 Introduction

A few months after I returned from fieldwork, an Indian friend shared a meme on a social media platform. Slightly amused, I visited the page it had been originally created by, and began to look at the others, which were mostly written in Devanagari script (which I am unable to read), although occasionally in ‘Hinglish’, with the two scripts used together. There was one meme in particular, posted in April 2018, which caught my attention (Figure 8.1). The meme contrasts two sentences – one in English and one in (transliterated) Hindi – which offer similar baseline information (the person in question has not been around much lately) but with radically different ‘translations’ according to each language. Wanting to be sure of my translation of the Hindi part, I sent the picture to Amir, the NGO facilitator – who I remain in regular contact with –and asked for his help. He was slightly reluctant at first, warning me that he could help, but that “the meaning is a bit vulgar”. When I reassured him that I knew what BC referred to – behenchod (literally: sister fucker) – he laughed and proceeded to assist me with the translation: “I don’t know where he is getting screwed/whose ass he is screwing these days, sister fucker”, or less literally, perhaps “I don’t know where the fuck he’s screwing around these days”. The contrast with the corresponding English phrase (“He’s so busy nowadays”) is unarguably striking. Curious about Amir’s opinion, I then asked him what he thought the meme was trying to

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11 Sections from this chapter appear in a publication I produced with Alfonso Del Percio (Highton & Del Percio 2021b). Permission has been sought from my co-author and only my own contributions to the text are reproduced here.
show: “It basically means that English people are way more respective\textsuperscript{12} towards each other even in the absence of their friends. But in Hindi they roast people in the easiest sentences”. Interested by his reference to ‘English people’, I asked him to clarify. “Correction”, he replied, “Not English people but anyone who speaks in English… Even Indians when they speak the same thing in English they speak nicely but the moment they switch. They become the same third class vulgar kind of”. We went on to discuss whether Amir felt that this was the case for him, and he explained how “3 years ago I would be the one who says the same line in almost every time. But gradually I stopped using. It doesn’t mean that I don’t use at all. But I prefer not to use it. It just sounds a bit cheap. Even if somebody hears around you. They will also judge”. We spoke for a bit longer and, as is my usual practice, I sought to confirm that he was still happy for me to use our Facebook messages in my research. “See…” he replied, “That’s why they say that English people are really polite”, reminding to “chill”, with a laughing emoji.

Both the meme and the ensuing interaction with Amir are particularly relevant to this chapter. First of all, in the meme we see a binary framing of English as (relatively) polite, contrasted with a particularly vulgar framing of Hindi, one which, here, Amir explicitly links to lower classes (“third class vulgar kind of”). This is not to say that English is framed as ‘better’ than Hindi \textit{per se}, but it sheds light on how the two languages are differentiated from one another in the types of behaviour that are associated with them. Of course, this could also be interpreted as a framing in which Hindi is the language that allows for ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ expression, whereas English remains distant, aloof and formal. Either way, the two languages are clearly constructed along an axis of differentiation. Importantly, Amir explains this by referring to the behaviour of the speakers themselves, stating that English people – later corrected to encompass all English speakers – are polite. His correction, or mistake, is interesting as through this we see once again his association of English as a language with the English people, and thus, by extension, with their assumed cultural norms (see Chapter 5). He also indicates that he too has undergone a transformation of sorts over the last three years, from using vulgar (Hindi) speech regularly to hardly using it at all. While he does not

\textsuperscript{12} My assumption here is that he meant ‘respectful’.
express this explicitly, these last three years coincide with his English learning journey, and him graduating from and promptly becoming a facilitator at the NGO. We see thus an indication of what will become a key theme of this chapter – that of English as an “agent of transformation” (Jayadeva 2018:606). Finally, in his response to my request for consent to use the conversation as data (“do you mind if I use some of what you have said in my research?”), we see not only a reiteration of the association of English speakers (here again, English people) and politeness, but also an interpretation of the request that aligns with the axis of differentiation of politeness and rudeness which, as we will see, becomes a dominant framework in which not only languages but also their speakers are mapped. What is curious here is how this would have been very different from my own interpretation – in my perspective, my request was ethical, and certainly used what is considered a politeness form (“do you mind if…?”) but I would not have framed it as so ‘polite’ as to comment upon. We thus had different frameworks to draw on to interpret the request.

This chapter seeks to draw on the themes evoked above in order to delve into the personhoods that are attached to the different languages in my participants’ repertoires, and the axes of differentiation along which they fall. Here, I follow Agha in his definition of personhood as:

contingent, performable behaviors effectively linked to social personae for some determinate population […] When performed as behaviors they index the persona (or social image) of the one performing them, a case where they make social personae inferable as facts about definite individual actors and thereby function as singular indexical icons, or concrete emblems (2011:172-173)

Drawing on Gal and Irvine’s (2019) work on differentiation in ideology, I begin with a contrast of the personhoods attached to Hindi and local dialects, demonstrating how to both speak and not speak these languages is to perform a particular social type, mapped along an axis of differentiation between ‘rude’ and ‘polite’, but also more broadly along an axis of ‘civilised-ness’. For the remainder of the chapter, I explore what I have termed English Speakerhood, arguing that what the students seek to acquire, and what the NGO seeks to inculcate, is not only the cultivation of a neoliberal subjectivity as demonstrated in Chapter 7. Rather, the acquisition of English “goes beyond
being a skill” to become an “agent of transformation” (Jayadeva 2018:606). This ‘transformation’ of the self (in both body and mind) implies the acquisition of a whole host of cultural capital and dispositions that have come to be associated with English, and which are not only entangled in neoliberal discourses of employability, freedom and mobility (Chapter 7) but also with class, caste and colonialism. Without them – without English speakerhood – I argue, English as linguistic capital loses its value. But first, in order to understand clearly what English speakerhood represents for the students, we have to see what it is contrasted against – that is, the other languages (and attached personhoods) in their repertoire.

8.2 Differentiation
In their recent book, Gal and Irvine (2019) evoke the notion of differentiation as a key factor on which all linguistic practice depends. Crucial to their conceptualisation is the understanding of differentiation as “a process, not a matter of units” (2019: 11) – a semiotic process which is deeply ideological, embedded in political economy, and works through comparison to draw on and organise “specific frameworks of knowledge” (ibid:85). As a rather light-hearted example, they evoke the common social type of a pirate, often indexed through “a loud, harsh voice with strong rhotic consonants” (ibid:19). Importantly, they note, “it is in contrast with some other stereotype that such qualities become evident” (ibid:85). They thus draw attention to how the social construction and indexing of various social types becomes meaningful when compared – seen as different to – other co-existing social types. In this way, then, in order to interrogate the social type – or personhood – associated with English speakers in India, it is important first of all to address the other language-associated social types with which it comes to be contrasted. To do so requires an understanding of how the discursive construction of English speakers is shaped as different from that of speakers of other languages that the students have in their repertoires. Of course, this is not a simple case of ‘English = good, Hindi = bad’, but is rather, as we will see, an assemblage of contrasting, ideologically shaped social types whose values are negotiated across time and space, but also deeply embedded in colonial and class-based power structures. In this way, we can see more clearly how English derives its
social meaning in part from the distinctions that are made between it and other languages, that is, how they are framed along an axis of differentiation, which, when evoked, “divides a whole world of phenomena into qualitatively contrasting images or ‘sides’”. (Gal & Irvine 2019:118). As such, the first sections of this chapter provide a brief overview of the indexicalities and social types associated with Hindi and the students’ other local vernaculars.

8.2.1 Hindi and local vernaculars
In Chapter 5, we saw how the pressure placed on students by both NGO policy and their own investment therein to speak a ‘pure’ English thus leads them to eschew fluid language practices, despite this being a) an extremely common practice in India, and b) a resource that could help them in their language learning. However, a rejection of fluid practices did not necessarily mean a rejection of Hindi. There was a clear understanding that Hindi had no place within English, but this did not imply a devaluation or demonisation of the language. Indeed, as Proctor writes, “the pressures of dominant discourses notwithstanding, Hindi and other regional languages continue to be important sources of cultural, regional, and national identity” (2014:308). To demonstrate, she sheds light on “alternative sub-discourses that, while emphasizing the value of English, locate it as a pragmatic resource rather than a positive cultural one” (ibid). She provides the example of the writer, Rajkishore, a staunch Hindi supporter, who found himself troubled with the decision of which medium to educate his son in. He eventually decided, despite having taken part in the Remove English campaigns, to send his son to English-medium school for ‘pragmatic’ reasons. This anguish stemmed from a dichotomous relationship between Hindi and English, that is, a relationship “between sentimentality/emotion (bhavukta) and reality (yatharth), respectively” (ibid). As such, opting for English education does not mean that one devalues Hindi; often, such a choice simply represents a pragmatic acknowledgement of the wider cultural capital possessed by English speakers (a capital which, as we saw in Chapter 7, is not without complication).

Hindi thus has its own place in complex and dynamic hierarchies of languages that the students both built on and reinforced. In the NGO, we can note the ideological erasure (Irvine & Gal 2000) of other languages from the
students’ repertoires that is embedded within the ‘no-Hindi’ rule (Chapter 5). This policy did not, of course, mean that students were free to use other (Indian) languages, but rather ‘no-Hindi’ became a catchall term for anything that was not English, thus creating a binary between the two dominant languages, in which all others are erased. This binary was often reproduced in students’ conversations about language-medium education, in which Hindi and English were discussed in ways that constructed them as the only possible options for education. Much like for Rajkishore, students frequently demonstrated a pride in what they (erroneously) referred to as ‘our national language’ (Hindi is one of two official languages, the second ‘associate’ language being English, with 22 regionally recognised languages; India has no ‘national’ language per se). Many of them expressed their desire for their children to learn Hindi, with some appearing very conflicted over whether or not to send their children to English-medium school: they wished for them to have access to English in ways that they had not, but they were reticent about their offspring potentially losing the ability to communicate in Hindi. Despite the multilingual reality of India, we see languages framed here in a competitive sense – to gain one, is to lose the other. However, it is not only a case of losing the language, but rather, of what the language represents – it is also a loss of identity. As Arnav told me:

If we forget our national language/ we are nothing/ then we can do nothing/ we are nothing in our life// you can see/ if we don’t know our national language that what will happen// we forget our everything

However, despite the ancestral or national loyalty that they felt towards Hindi, they remained very aware that, in the fields of power – education, private enterprise, the labour market more widely – Hindi did not hold the same capital in Bourdieusian terms. We are reminded here of Amir’s comments in Chapter 6, where he was not quite able to put his finger on just why an English-speaking doctor is that much more ‘special’ than their Hindi-speaking counterpart. Thus, in certain discourses, when contrasted with English speakers, Hindi speakers are positioned as deficient in terms of their ability to succeed in modern India. However, when Hindi is contrasted with smaller, local languages – often referred to as dialects – such as the one spoken
by students in the branch, Hindi regains its relative superiority through its associations with the (Hindu) Indian nation, and local dialects are marginalised and denied legitimacy. Mohanty (2019) refers to this as the ‘double divide’. Building upon Ramanathan’s (2005) notion of the English-versus vernacular medium education divide, he refers to a ‘vernacular-other divide’ to illustrate the way in which languages and dialects not recognised by the census or the constitution are relegated to the lower end of the Indian language hierarchy and thereby delegitimised. Referring to Bhojpuri, a language mostly spoken in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (often referred to as a ‘dialect’ of Hindi), LaDousa describes how:

People found the idea of Bhojpuri in school texts and exams, much less in classroom interaction, ridiculous. They had at their disposal a whole set of descriptors to explain why Bhojpuri is not meant for school. People consistently contrasted Bhojpuri as gāv kī bhāṣā (language of the village) and ghar kī bhāṣā (language of the house) to Hindi as rāṣṭrabhāṣā (national language) or deś kī bhāṣā (language of the land/nation). As such, Hindi could stand proudly next to English, often described as antarāṣṭrabhāṣā (international language) (2014:48)

This became clear to me one morning as I was chatting with some of the students over a break time. One student asked if he could teach me a few words of his local dialect – the one spoken by the agrarian caste group of many of the students – much to the shocked amusement of all the other students, who clearly found it rather absurd that I would either want or need to learn it. He began teaching me a few words, when one of the young women present jumped in and told him to stop, before turning to me and saying, “Ma’am, don’t learn that, it’s a rude language”. The reaction of the students to my learning of their local dialect resonates with LaDousa’s participants’ framing of Bhojpuri as inappropriate for formal or institutionalised settings, thus demonstrating how languages in India get indexically mapped onto specific people, places and functions (the home, the village and thus villagers, education etc.), and the ways in which languages in India tend to be described “by area, quality, and domain of practice” (LaDousa 2017:83). In addition to this framing, however, in the interaction in the NGO there is also an invocation of ‘rudeness’. The language is not only inappropriate for a formal
setting – or perhaps, inappropriate for a foreigner (me) to learn – but was also deemed to be ‘rude’. ‘Rudeness’ here, I interpret, does not seem to refer to the same ‘rudeness’ evoked by Amir in the discussion about the meme. In Amir’s example, we encounter notions of vulgarity and indecency; ‘rude’ in reference to the students’ interaction seems to refer more to ideas of uncouthness, of being unrefined. Nevertheless, it appears to me that they remain related; they exist along a continuum of ‘rudeness’, with vulgarity being at the extreme end and, at the other end notions of politeness, sophistication and refinedness that, as we will see, only certain languages are mapped onto. What is perhaps most important here is not how these two examples are ‘rude’ in different ways, but rather, how they are both framed as not polite, which thus leads us to ask what exactly does count as ‘polite’. Interestingly, however, in an interview with Arnav, who speaks this dialect, he contested this discourse:

Katy: so you said they [his community] speak rural language/ villagers’ language/ what do you mean by that

Arnav: rural language/ like villagers’ language/ like they speak means for us it’s good but if someone/ if a city boy or city girl will talk with us then she think that we are talking very rudely// but for us it’s normal because our language is like that/ that’s why// but if foreigner girl or you or ma’am [the facilitator] will talk with us normally in Hindi then ma’am will think that we are very rude person because our language is like that/ you can say straight language/ flat language that’s why// but we are not rudely (laughs) our language is like that/ our ancestors is also speak like that so that’s why we also speak same as

Arnav notes how when he uses his dialect with Hindi speakers, he is perceived as ‘rude’ – i.e. impolite or uncouth – due to the dialect’s ‘straightness’ or the cultural communicative norms of speaking ‘directly’ and without markers of social formality, a practice which Arnav claims to have inherited from his ancestors who spoke this language. He thus points to how this notion of ‘rude’ language – which, as we will see later, is a key axis along which English and other languages are differentiated – is transferred through the process of iconisation (or rhematisation) to the speakers, who are themselves in this way essentialised and perceived as ‘rude’, thus playing to
the negative stereotype of this community as unruly, thuggish, ‘not gentlemen’ (Mohit, Chapter 6). Thus, we can again see here the ideological linking of language and ethnicity or, more specifically here, ancestral ‘community’ – likely an indirect reference to his caste group, but also to his ‘rurality’ and ‘village-ness’ (implied through the reference to “city boys and city girls”) – that was shaped through colonial attempts to document the languages of India, and which reinforce “essentializing relationships between language, ethnicity, and personhood” (Carlan 2018:118). Further, as Gal and Irvine (2019) write, “often, narratives of rhematization interpret the quality as cause – as if the (invisible) national character imputed to French people caused the linguistic phenomena that are taken to resemble it” (ibid:19-20) or, more specifically to this case, as if the ‘rude’ nature of Arnav’s community resulted in the ‘rudeness’ of the language, which leads thus to a “circular logic” (ibid:64). This is further reinforced by discourses of caste that frame caste groups as having fundamental differences, be it “different ‘values’, different ways of doing things” (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994:19) or even inherent essential differences. While these polemical notions are fiercely debated (see Chapter 2), what it draws attention to is the ways in which caste is widely understood as a project of differentiation – such and such a caste has these qualities, other castes have those qualities, and so on – and how language plays a key role in reinforcing the ideological perpetuation of difference through such iconisation. Importantly, as Irvine has demonstrated through her work on Wolof social organisation, this differentiation works to normalise and explain social inequality: “Clearly, the ideology that is operative here is an ideology of much more than language. It is a structure of symbolism and precepts that organize, and in that sense “explain” or rationalize, differences of social rank” (Gal & Irvine 2019:31).

What is particularly interesting here is how Arnav, although only 17-years-old, is challenging how his community is viewed. Although he still refers to Hindi as ‘normal’, thereby naturalising its perceived unmarked character (Bucholtz & Hall 2005), he refuses to devalue his way of speaking and, in doing so, he shows a sophisticated sociolinguistic awareness that his language is not deficient or negative – and nor, importantly, are its speakers – but rather, that it simply does not share the same communicative norms as mainstream Hindi (although, we should remember here that he still continues
to seek out English). Nevertheless, while Arnav certainly questioned the
dominant narrative, the majority of the students frequently engaged in the
symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1994) that devalue this language
and, in turn, those who speak it. As Heller and McElhinny remind us,
"societies are never homogenous" (2017:7) and so there are “multiple
positionalities possible, and multiple ideologies” (ibid). Conflicting ideologies
that imbue Hindi, English and other languages with different values across
different linguistic markets (or fields, to use Bourdieu’s terms) based on their
connections with the national and the international are clearly apparent
(LaDousa 2014) and are deeply contextually contingent. Hindi holds a great
deal of prestige as a so-called ‘national’ language and in certain fields,
particularly in North India (where this research took place), it possesses high
cultural capital. These students demonstrate that it is possible to hold complex
and at times conflicting views – none of them disliked Hindi, they had a lot of
respect for it, and spoke very proudly about their ‘mother tongue’ (which,
again, demonstrates the erasure of the dialect they speak at home and
perpetuates discourses of Hindi as the true, legitimate, national (Hindu)
language). However, as we have seen in Chapter 6, they also perceived
English to add something to their self-worth in a way that Hindi cannot, which
can only be understood by taking into account how these languages are
catched up in processes of differentiation that involve not only the language
but equally the social types associated with it. To speak English or Hindi or a
local dialect is to project – or occupy – a different personhood, as we will see
in more detail later in the chapter.

8.2.3 ‘Only English’
In turn, not to speak these languages, is also to engage in particular
personhoods. Nowhere was this clearer to me than when I spent time among
some of the more privileged Delhiites where, contrary to what one might
expect, the inability to speak a language was a source of pride. In an up-market
bar in Hauz Khas, a ‘trendy’ area that attracts Delhi’s (English-speaking)
moneyed society and foreign tourists, I entered into a conversation with an
Indian man who had lived as an expatriate in Atlanta, U.S.A, for the previous
five years. He was eager to tell me how he had ‘completely lost’ his Hindi: “I
can’t even make a simple sentence now”, he claimed. While it is certainly
possible that his competency may have declined due to lack of exposure and use, it is highly improbable that five years in an Anglophone country would counteract his thirty years of growing up in Delhi. It was clearly important to him that he distance himself socially from the language. Similarly, in conversations with an English-medium educated senior manager of the NGO, he recounted proudly to me – twice – the story of how he failed 5th grade Hindi. This was despite the fact that on multiple occasions, I witnessed him speaking on the phone and with staff in a fluent Hindi.

The comments made to me were likely intended to be taken lightly. But what is interesting about them is the desire to portray oneself – even playfully – as an incompetent Hindi speaker. In a study of how elite English-speaking Indians in Delhi positioned themselves towards Hindi, Chand argues:

these liberal elites ideologically construct their Hindi (in)competency in an alternative framework attending to the history (and failure) of Hindi-based nationalism, their disalignment with modern right-wing movements, and their continued affiliation with English (2011:6).

In so doing, they thus attempt to indexically distance themselves from Hindutva nationalist ideologies that can come to be associated, *inter alia*, with speaking Hindi. Such a positioning, he writes, “contributes to socially constituted borders and separates various Indian elite populations from each other and from India’s lower classes” (ibid:7). By shunning this language, then, these speakers occupy a particular personhood, one that indexes belonging to a liberal progressive elite. While Chand’s analysis rests on a particular ideological association with Hindi that is not always dominant (equating Hindi with Hindutva), Chidsey’s (2018) analysis of similar behaviour in her ethnographic study of young upper-caste girls attending elite English medium schools provides a slightly less far-reaching interpretation. Chidsey’s participants “expressed feeling a certain kind of assumed pressure to speak English and pretend they didn’t speak Hindi well once they arrived at their Public School” (p.42). More importantly, along with this being a way to “embody English language prestige” (ibid) and make claims to the upper middle class, it also became part of a gendered performance:
Female students encountered moments where they had to mediate or balance displays of class and “appropriate” femininity with linguistic practices deemed “cool” among their peers. While boys could speak certain types of Hindi, Marwari, tapori street slang, abuses, etcetera, and largely remain validated in their masculinity, many students at the all-girls’ schools expressed being policed when they engaged in similar practices (ibid:49-50).

Indeed, in the discussion I had online with Amir about the meme included at the beginning of the chapter, he was quick to note that “only boys use [these Hindi terms] for other boys”, thus emphasising that this was not language typically used by or about women (or, at least, ‘polite’ women). One could also conjecture that my womanhood may have been, alongside my Britishness and whiteness, what prompted the young woman to jump in and prevent me from learning the students’ local dialect. As such, the practice of using English (and not Hindi or other vernaculars) is embedded not only within class projects, but equally within idealised social types of (upper middle-class) femininity. Such a project works by drawing on indexicalities of English that construe it as a more refined, less vulgar language, and thus allowing its speakers to embody these characteristics. While Hindi is not deemed to be ‘unfeminine’ per se, it is the use of ‘abuses’ or vulgar terms in Hindi which are deemed inappropriate for young women. However, the ways in which the young women talk about Hindi as allowing vulgarity, and the perceived lack of space for such behaviour in English, implies an iconisation – or rhematisation – of Hindi as vulgar (Gal & Irvine 2019). That is, Hindi here doesn’t just ‘point to’ (index) being vulgar or unfeminine, it becomes emblematic of it: “defined by Peirce as the simplest sign relation, iconicity is one in which […] a sign is taken to represent an object through some similarity between them. They are similar if they share real-time features, that is, qualia.” (ibid:97). And it is here that we can see how contrasts are particularly important because, as we will see, English comes to emblematise the opposite – politeness – in a move that echoes Franz Fanon’s writings on the colonial differentiation of civilisation and the French language on one hand, and savagery, vulgarity and Creole on the other (1967, see also Gal & Irvine 2019:157). In turn, speakers too are divided along the axis of differentiation between politeness and rudeness depending on the languages they speak (and this is further complicated through gender norms). Importantly, the ability to
be vulgar or ‘abuse’ people in English is ideologically erased – a semiotic move that is vital to rhematisation: “Erasures abound in efforts to achieve rhematization. Perceived qualities that do not fit the schema are ignored, denied, or eliminated” (Gal & Irvine 2019:124).

What we have here then, is a clear indication of ideologically constructed personhoods attached, through processes of rhematisation and erasure, to the multiple languages in the students’ repertoires, namely English, Hindi, and – through the process of fractal recursivity, as we saw with the discussion of ‘rude’ languages – their local dialect. While the preceding discussion has provided a brief overview of the indexical associations and iconisations of Hindi speakers and speakers of the local dialect, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address in more detail the personhoods associated with Hindi or other languages. In what follows, I focus instead on what I term ‘English speakerhood’. This is a conception and sensibility into which the NGO attempts to inculcate its students. It is also one that the students themselves desire, and which is perceived to be a product of the ‘transformative’ nature of English.

8.3 English speakerhood
In the following sections, I will argue that what counts as ‘English’ and ‘learning English’ is more than the investment in the acquisition of a cultural capital that can be converted into a job opportunity, a promotion or a better salary. Rather, it represents the inculcation of an entire personhood built on colonial practices and class and caste stratification. As Jayadeva has argued, “the role of English in people’s class projects […] goes beyond being a skill, experienced as it is as an agent of transformation” (2018:606). That is, what English provides to its speakers is perceived as “going beyond the indexical” by “actually engendering these qualities in a person” (ibid:594), or “transforming” its speakers. Much like Jayadeva’s participants, many of the facilitators I spoke to, and indeed as NGO material claimed, stated that as students improved their English, “their confidence increased, they started dressing more stylishly, their body language changed, and they became more polite and refined” (ibid). We see thus a shift from language competency as a skill that encompasses only linguistic factors, to an ability to “perform this
cultural style” (ibid:596). Taking a cue from Jayadeva’s argument, I explore how learning English in the NGO represents a self-inculcation of the moral and colonial dimensions of English speakerhood – that is, it encompasses a transformation of the self (in both body and mind), a new mode of being in the world that is not only entangled in neoliberal discourses of employability, freedom and mobility (see Chapter 7) but also with class, caste and colonialism. For people on the ground, aspiring to capitalise on language, then, is an attempt to capitalise on an incorporated mode of being, i.e., a bodily disposition, that, in line with Bourdieu’s habitus, entails both one’s body posture, corporeal hygiene, manners and language and at the same time more abstract mental habits, schemes of perception, classification, appreciation, taste.

8.3.1 English and personality development

As we saw in the previous chapter, English instruction is not the only form of training provided by the NGO. In promotional material, they outline 5 key areas of focus for students, namely: soft and non-cognitive skills, English language skills, lifelong learning through MOOCs, mentoring, and career guidance. Indeed, in a conversation with the CEO, he expressed trepidation about the myth of the panacea of English for social mobility. While he asserted that English was a crucial component in providing opportunities to disadvantaged students – and the primary reason for student enrolment – he explained that the NGO strives to offer them much more, by training them in skills that will help them secure professional jobs upon completion of the course. “English”, he relayed, “is only one third of what we do”. The design of the curriculum puts heavy emphasis on job training, with multiple opportunities for students to practice CV writing, interviews and skill-development specifically for the workplace. According to the facilitators, these additional skills – often referred to under the umbrella term ‘personality development’ – are not offered to students in mainstream education. Amir, the facilitator, voiced his frustration with the public education system, claiming that not only did it fail to provide students with what he calls “adequate levels of English”, but it also failed to show students how to showcase their “personality”. It is clear, then, that these additional skills and
personality development, *alongside English*, are perceived to be essential for the students’ prosperity.

In the NGO, the term ‘personality development’ encompasses a wide range of what are often termed ‘soft skills’, many of which - growth mindset, lifelong learning, discipline, perseverance – are studied within lessons. As we saw in the previous chapter, these ‘soft skills’, peppered throughout NGO documentation and frequently cited by students, become part of a register (Agha 2003) that students learn to adopt in class as a means for them to ‘fit in’, and are deployed strategically in order to display social alignments (Urciuoli 2008). As such, by learning and adopting this skills register, students are able to align themselves with the image of a ‘good’ student who will work hard to improve themself. In line with my argument in Chapter 7, in her ethnographic exploration of ‘Personality Development and Enhancement’ training for the middle classes in Delhi, McGuire argues that the professionalism produced by these courses is “distinctly neoliberal in nature, characterized by a culture of enterprise in which disciplined self-government appears paramount” (2013:110). For McGuire, these exercises in personality development are also class-based: they offer young Indians a path to construct “enterprising, new middle-class selves” (2013:113), which are not only linked to wealth and consumption practices but also to their ability to enact a certain self in particular urban spaces, where purchasing coffee “is not so much an economic transaction or a demonstration of taste as it is a bodily performance of competency – a spatial practice – which signals belonging within a particular social geography marked as aspirational” (ibid).

In order to successfully navigate certain urban spaces (malls, coffee shops) young Indians must adopt particular bodily dispositions. In this way, personality development as constructed in these courses is an attempt to inculcate a new habitus (Bourdieu 1977a), attuned to certain urban spaces. Such spaces require particular practices in order to claim ‘belonging’ (or even to be allowed access (Brosius 2010), from the smooth handling of the escalator and an engagement with shop employees that differs from market interactions, to the simple decision of whether or not to attempt to “brave the gaze of the [security] guards” at the entrance (McGuire 2013:121; see also Brosius 2010). Being in such spaces requires one to master practices of belonging in aspirational spaces. Personality development is thus an attempt
to retrain the habitus: it is a project embedded in neoliberalism, certainly, but one that is specifically invested in the production of a certain type of middle class which is the product not only of contemporary capitalism but, as we will see, longer histories of colonialism too.

8.3.2 English is personality development

While the underlying process of what some have called neoliberal governmentality (see e.g. Martín-Rojo & Del Percio 2019) is clearly present in the way the NGO strives to shape students into “bundles of skills” (Urciuoli 2008), to leave the analysis here would be to overlook another important element. That is, alongside the neoliberally-informed notion of personality development training, there is equally a conflation of ‘English’ with ‘personality (development)’, a notion which was repeatedly offered by participants. Rupal, the other facilitator who had previously attended the NGO as a student herself, recalled what she had learnt through the process:

There were many things like what’s the meaning of diversity/ what’s the meaning of integrity/ ok and I got to know that there is something called group discussion and there are some rules/ do’s and don’ts of group discussion/ I didn’t know that how to talk to somebody […] now I know the way how to talk with somebody/ how can we interact people/ how can we invite people in our conversation with making facial expression/ eye contact/ using intonation/ so there are many factors which if you ask somebody who doesn’t know English they’ll say it’s just grammar thing like if you know grammar you can speak English/ but they really don’t know that only grammar doesn’t work

She recognises that the NGO had provided her with much more than access to the language – glossed here as ‘only grammar’. She claims that it has also instilled in her a variety of ‘skills’ that range from how to use the body and the voice, to ‘values’ such as appreciating diversity and ‘qualities’ such as integrity. What Rupal reports having learnt is indeed what the NGO hopes to achieve. And yet, there is a slight but important difference in how Rupal has perceived this process. While the NGO’s promotional material implies that it offers English alongside these other ‘skills’, for Rupal, these two notions are
inherently linked. These skills are not only collocated with English, but they are a crucial part of speaking English: “only grammar doesn’t work”. Of course, this is partially linked to Hymes’ (1972) communicative competence, wherein the acquisition of a language requires an understanding of communicative norms along with what is traditionally understood as language learning. Yet, communicative competence does not encompass the moral or transformational dimensions that, as I demonstrate later, these students see as an integral part of speaking English. Indeed, when posed with a similar question, Amir expressed this rather explicitly:

Personality development is English ok (laughs) so just everything related with personality development is English so /yeah English/ first here we are teaching personality development/ but at the end people are not coming here for personality development/ people come here for English and then they learn personality development right/ so it’s English that attracts them/ English is the reason why they are here/ ok if I tell them that ok English is gone/ now we teach [in Hindi] how to stand/ how to sit/ how to talk with you know foreigner/ why would they come (laughs) there’s no benefit

Again, English and personality development are not only collocated, but are arguably even considered to be the same thing. Personality development without English is an absurd idea, indicated both by Amir’s laugh and his claim that nobody would attend if English were to be removed from the curriculum. He continues:

I feel personality development starts with English in our country/ ok that’s called personality development/ if you speak in English that’s called personality [...] nobody says that you need to work on your Hindi or you need to speak very good intellectual sort of way in Hindi [...] the personality development is all about English first

Personality development, according to Amir, does not exist as a concept for other languages. Amir laughs again as he struggles to recall the Hindi term for personality development, stating that “nobody knows it in Hindi anyway”. For Amir, English is personality. Evidently, ‘personality’ does not seem to be understood here as idiomatic characteristics: it is rather improbable
that he believes that no other language than English allows a person to be a distinctive individual. Rather, personality seems to be used here by Amir – and, as we will see, by the students – as a euphemism for ‘appropriate’ conduct, for an expected way of behaving. As such, while we can certainly see that the personality development training is underscored by a neoliberal ethos, there is simultaneously a direct link to what the English language is imagined to represent, meaning that the students are not only being shaped to become entrepreneurial selves, but they are also becoming *English speakers*, which requires much more than learning the language. It is a process that requires learning how to *do* English speakerhood. In one interview with Sakshi, a student who had almost completed the yearlong course, I asked if she would have attended if the course had been delivered in Hindi. She frowned and laughed at the question, as if the answer was obvious, then stated:

> It’s not benefit for us because the family always teach us/ because the first school is our family and they always teach us how to deal and how to improve your personality and how to live in a city and how to live […] but English is the thing like/ this is not our language/ [if] I want to learn any other’s language we have to learn their er/ how to act like this/ and how to body language/ how to behave/ behaviour […] so I think that’s why they come here/ if they will teach in Hindi (laughs) everybody will not come here

Like Amir, the mere thought of such a course in Hindi was laughable. In the way Sakshi frames her language learning, she and other students have already learned how to behave and ‘improve [our] personality’ in Hindi, but by attending the NGO she hopes to learn how to behave *in this new language*. When asked why the NGO teaches personality development if the students already learn it at home she replied, “the family always saying in Hindi/ but whenever you speak in English your body language and your behaviour also become different”. The two languages are associated, here, with entirely different ways of being in the world. Personality development is thus the development of an English speaking ‘personality’ or rather, subjectivity, which they perceive to be inaccessible and unthinkable in another language.
8.3.3 Transforming the self

So, what exactly does this English-speaking ‘personality’ consist of? Across multiple conversations, it became clear that participants perceived themselves to have undergone a transformation by becoming English speakers, and that this transformation was understood to stem from the language itself. As one student stated in class in response to a discussion on the importance of English, ‘it makes us different from what we were earlier’. Rather than simply equating English speakers with certain characteristics, the students actively desire and acquire the performance of certain behaviours that they believe to be a necessary, or even resultant, part of being an English speaker. It is critical at this point to explore in more detail precisely what these ‘behaviours’ are, and how the NGO instils them. While conscious that such a division invokes Cartesian dualism and thus glosses over how the two are inherently linked, for the purposes of illustrating these two aspects in detail, I will address them in two sections: morality, and the body.

- Morality

The belief in the power of English to foster positive moral change in individuals was a common narrative among the students. In an interview with one student, Sakshi, a university graduate who dreamt of returning to her ancestral village in Uttar Pradesh to open an English language school, she made persistent references to English as a ‘polite’ language. While no specific examples were given for why English is perceived to be so ‘polite’ (aside from its “sweet sound”), this was a frequent claim made by students as well as by Indians outside of the NGO. A young, English-medium educated Bengali woman who shared my dorm in the hostel explained that at home she preferred to speak English with her family, given that “English has more subtle way of putting things. Even slang is more, you know, controlled than our mother tongue” (we are reminded here of the meme from the beginning of the chapter and of Amir’s ensuing analysis). These sensuous qualities of softness and sweetness (Gal 2013) which informants projected onto English were, as we have already seen, heavily contrasted with those of the local Hindi dialect spoken in the area around the branch, as students recounted how “city boys and girls” think their way of speaking is “rude” or uncouth. The inferred ‘politeness’ of English becomes iconic (Irvine & Gal 2000; Gal & Irvine 2019).
of the identity of English speakers and, importantly, does so in such a way that the contingent, historical and conventional nature of the connection between English, English speakers and ‘politeness’ is overlooked and normalised.

Importantly, this iconisation is so deeply unquestioned that the participants, on multiple occasions, identified the language itself as the sole impetus for transforming moral behaviour. In an anecdote recounted by Amir, he expressed frustration over an incident where he had bought a fashionable new backpack and had taken it with him when meeting his friends. The only one of his friends to comment on his ‘cool bag’ – or indeed, in other examples, his Marvel jacket, a new haircut or a meal of fried prawns that he had made – was his English-speaking friend. The others, he sighed, “they see that this is something new but they don’t say it”. For Amir, this was an inherent difference between “good-mannered” English speakers and the “negativity” of those who don’t speak English, who will only comment in order to criticise – a trait which, he claimed, was quintessentially Indian: “we invented this”. Later in the conversation, when asked to elaborate further on how English ostensibly instilled such ‘qualities’ in its speakers, he explained:

You know it’s sort of like manners for us/ how to say thank you/ how to say sorry how to say/ you know/ excuse me/ and thinking about other people/ considering other people that they also live in the same world where we live right/ so when you learn English you learn all these very/ what do you call/ ground level things right.

English, then, is perceived to enact positive transformations on the speaker via its inculcation of “manners” and compassion (“considering other people”), in ways that echo the embedding of certain values through the teaching of interactional norms in colonial language education (Lorente 2018). Indeed, through an analysis of the colonial education policy set by Macaulay, Durrani notes the emergence of two language ideologies:

The first ideology divides Indians into two linguistically-defined classes—the interpreter class of English speakers and the millions who are not English speakers; and the second ideology assumes that if Indians learn English, they
As we saw in Chapter 6, Durrani also argues how English is not only “ideologically linked to liberalism and modernity” but also positioned “in opposition to extremism” (2012:40-41). The abilities of English, constructed as a ‘civil’, ‘polite’ or ‘rational’ language, were also seen by Amir as a potential way to fight terrorism, as “English can actually can broader our thinking, you know, early age you know”. English is thus seen to have powerful effects in producing modern, ‘rational’ citizens, that cover a range of domains, such as sexuality and gender (see e.g. Hall 2019, 2005). Indeed, to return to Sakshi, the young woman who wanted to open an English language school in her village, part of her reasoning for wanting to do this was a desire to “change their thinking”, specifically with respect to oppressive gender norms for women. According to her logic, by teaching them English they will “improve themselves” and change their “narrow-minded thinking”. In doing this, Sakshi draws on both “the fallacy of equating Indian tradition with patriarchy and oppression and Western exposure (especially the influence of British colonialism) with modernity and progress” (Deshpande 2011:141) and the trope of the ‘un-enlightened’ rural-dwellers, which equates the village with ‘backwards’ thinking and the city with progressiveness, and is indicative of enlightenment and colonial ideologies (Heller and McElhinny 2017) of modernity, in which a duality is posited of the city as “civilized” and the village as disordered (Kaviraj 1997). This was an image that she herself believed she was fighting against by being an English-speaking ‘village girl’. Yet, in doing so, she reproduces the hegemonic position of English that marks it as superior because of its associations with modernity, and thus erases the potential for non-English speakers to stake claims to progressiveness or modernity (or indeed, to critique the meaning and implications of such terms).

Sakshi’s comments draw upon and reinforce discourses of the ‘enlightened’ modern, educated English-speaking classes who have ostensibly abandoned ‘traditional’ oppressive systems based on patriarchal ideals of appropriate womanhood. This works in tandem with, as we saw in previous chapters, the ways in which the modern (upper caste) middle classes make claims of a caste-less society, where caste belongs to the past, and where “the
language of caste is delegitimized in the modern public domain” (Mosse 2020:1232). For M. S.S Pandian, this is evidence of “the demands of an Indian upper caste modernity to hide and at once practice caste” (2002:1740). The discursive construction of castelessness and equality is essential to the maintenance of an appearance of modernity, but the continued (in)direct practice thereof is essential for some to maintain social boundaries that benefit them. In other words, caste may go unmentioned in certain English-speaking circles, but practices of hierarchy (whether they are rooted in caste or other forms of stratification) are far from non-existent. Language is one way in which such inequality justifies itself – Pandian’s “caste by other means” (2002:1735) – and is much easier to swallow.

Across the extracts in this section, we see thus the emergence of a binary in which the non-English speaker appears as an inverted mirror image of the English speaker. Where the English speaker is polite, has manners, is open-minded and progressive, the non-English speaker is ill-mannered, negative, backward and regressively attached to traditional and oppressive hierarchies. Importantly, however, this is not simply an association of English with certain valorised qualities, but rather a designation of the types of moral behaviours that are compatible with the image of the English speaker, behaviours which carry a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991). Such behaviours can be understood as “idealized social types” (Catedral & Djuraeva 2018:505) or “moralized behavioral scripts” (Blommaert 2018:49) that include both linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour and which have clear colonial, caste and class-based roots. Importantly, rather than recognising that these are collocated, explicitly learnt ‘scripts’ that are an integral part of successfully performing English speakerhood, they appear to the participants to be natural results – a “natural and automatic accompaniment” (Jayadeva 2018:596) – from mere exposure to the language, thus further normalising the ideological associations and discursively shaping English as an “agent of transformation” (ibid).

- **The body**
The transformative aspects of speaking English encompass not only moral behaviour but equally the body, evident in the explicit focus in the NGO on posture, facial expressions, presentability and hygiene (see also McGuire
245 (2013). These concepts, I argue, while seemingly neutral, are often terms that enclose veiled references to race, class and caste. That is to say, to look ‘presentable’ or to have ‘good hygiene’ or even to move the body in particular ways is to index a certain (stratified) social type or personhood. In a group discussion of private schools, one student (who, like other students and the facilitator, had herself attended a government school) stated that “they [private school students] look smart”, to which the facilitator added “yes, by looking also we find out this person is from private”. When we bear in mind the tendency to correlate private education with English education (an association that, as LaDousa (2014) writes is indicative of ideological erasure as private Hindi-medium schools do exist), we can infer from this that the students are able to tell “by looking” if a person has been educated in a private, English-medium school. Indeed, as LaDousa and Davis write, the notion of ‘medium’ is often used to not only identify the language used, the exams undertaken, and the type of student and teacher, but “can also be used to identify aspects and qualities of behavior, linguistic or otherwise, exhibited by people involved with a school” (2018:9 my emphasis), meaning that the term ‘medium’, “makes explicit some quality of the school and people at the same time that it sets the school and people apart from others, often in opposition to them” (ibid). One can thus ‘spot’ an English-educated speaker through certain behaviours before they even open their mouth.

Regulation of the body was a focal element of the curriculum in the NGO. The figure below (8.2), copied from a student’s workbook (student’s writing in italics), demonstrates the ways in which the NGO sought to inculcate certain bodily movements into the students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th align="center">C. Do’s and Don’ts – (POSTURE, GESTURES, FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, EYE CONTACT, WORD STRESS, TONE, PITCH AND VOLUME)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td align="center"><strong>Do’s</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td align="center"><em>We should sit with proper manners</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td align="center"><em>We should make eye contact</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td align="center"><em>We should raise hand before give our opinion</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td align="center"><em>We should come on the time</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8.2 Copy of student workbook
The importance placed on these bodily movements and actions was repeatedly emphasised in class, often in ways that associated these behaviours with the speaking of English. In a mentor session (in which students near completion of the course are paired with newer students to provide mentoring support), the mentor-student asked the facilitator to give her pointers on what the mentee-student needed the most help with:

Mentor: ma’am tell me about her/ any problems  
Facilitator: her problem/ like she is unable to frame sentence/ she is unable to give facial expressions  
Mentor: you cannot give facial expressions!  
Mentee: (laughs) no  
Facilitator: same face she has everywhere/ whether she is happy or sad or/  
Mentor: I found many facial expressions  
Facilitator: in class I don’t get  
Mentee: because I speak but I feel not ha/ er hesitation/ but after that/ I speak in class I feel hesitation (laughs)  
Mentor: she is speaking/ she is speaking  
Facilitator: means especially like she doesn’t have a smile on her face/ like the normal kind of smiling is not there/ I talk/ you talk/ we are smiling/ she doesn’t smile

The problem identified with this particular student is not only linguistic (“she is unable to frame sentence”) but also, and more importantly given how it becomes the main topic of the exchange, her ability to do “the normal kind of smiling”. Despite the attempt by the mentee to explain this through the hesitation and anxiety that she feels in class due to her comparatively weaker competency in the language, she is still criticised for not smiling. When the mentor points out that the mentee is indeed speaking, the facilitator ignores the comment and continues to comment on her lack of smile: we see, then, how the mentee’s speech is irrelevant if she is not performing the expected bodily behaviour alongside it. There is, of course, a gendered, affective dimension to this interaction, indicative of the expectations of the workplaces that these students are imagined to enter on completion of the course (service providers), where women are frequently called upon to perform emotional labour as part of their job (Heller and McElhinny 2017:246; Cameron 2000).
Alongside the regulation of bodily behaviour there is also an explicit attempt from the NGO to inculcate notions of self-presentation and bodily care. In Pathak’s interrogation of the notion of ‘presentability’ in India, the body becomes the site of expression of a “global Indian identity”, which, although “rooted in the social position of the middle classes, specifically urban middle-class professionals”, becomes an ideal to be consumed by those outside of this social group (2014:323). Drawing on Bourdieu, she describes presentability as embodied cultural capital, and thus as “a source of power, rooted in cultural hegemony – which, through its advantages for employment and marriageability, can produce economic and social power” (2014:323). Students in the NGO are repeatedly exhorted to pay attention to their presentability. From the first of the five English-teaching workbooks designed by the NGO that the students progress across over the course of the year, the concept of hygiene figures prominently, transforming into the arguably less loaded notion of ‘grooming’ towards the fourth and fifth book. Exercises such as “Hygiene check” required the students to reflect upon their own washing habits at home but also their ‘hygiene practices’ in public space: “How often do you pick your teeth/nose/ears in public?” Another poster on the wall of the centre reminded students not to “bite your nails/pick your nose/scratch your body parts with others around”. Scratching here is to be understood, of course, as a euphemism for scratching intimate body parts, as I have yet to ever see anyone reprimanded for attending to a mosquito bite on their arm. Such rules, I argue, draw on stratified, class-based values of ‘correct’ corporeal public behaviour, as they indirectly refer to public behaviour associated with the lower classes, that of attending to the body and bodily functions in public (such as open defecation) which the middle classes attempt to distance themselves from. Such an attempted distancing, one can assume, is exacerbated by the many travel blogs, or YouTube videos uploaded by tourists and Indians alike, which make reference to (or directly record) people engaging in such public bodily behaviours, and which have become a rather harmful stereotype of India in the West. A brief Google search for “Indian scratching” pulled up a range of videos entitled “Scratching one’s ass in public: Only in India”, “Old Indian man scratching thing”, as well as questions on forums “Why do some Indian men scratch their balls in public?” and travel blogs by both Indians and foreigners, with titles such as “Why do Indian men
scratch their testicles in public?” The latter, written by an Indian woman, concludes the article with: “Please note. Remember, not all Indian men do this, it all depends on their social class, their upbringing and their values” (Sharma, n.d.). Thus, such practices become part of class distinctions (with the middle classes claiming to not engage in such public practices), but also part of gendered expectations – we note how the examples above all refer to men. However, in a “tongue-in-cheek ode to India” – a series of essays published under the title Indian Essentials (2010) – which, notably, refers to “the Indian male’s penchant for public urination” in the blurb, one author writes about the “genuine irritant that is scratching in public”, by which he means “scratching genitalia”. He implies that this is not a gendered practice: “people scratching their genitalia from outside their trousers – and, I’m afraid, saris – are probably oblivious to the fact that they may be doing what they do” (Hazra 2010:331). Such a framing is interesting, as he acknowledges that this bodily practice is also engaged in by women, but through the interjection, “I’m afraid”, he indicates awareness that readers may be particularly shocked (indeed, he reveals his own positioning here too) that women also scratch intimate parts of their person in public. Given that we have already established the common association of this practice with the lower classes, he thus frames lower class women as not conforming to understandings of correct (middle-class) feminine behaviour. At the end of his paragraph, he apologises to his reader, stating “In other words, there’s nothing you can do about that motley crew in front of your house scratching themselves while you have those European house guests over to dinner”. The reference to European guests makes clear the colonial underpinnings that are part of how such behaviours come to be stigmatised (it is the European’s perceived ‘civilised’ sensibilities that would cause embarrassment for the Indian host), and the reference to the ‘motley crew’ hanging outside the house indirectly indexes the lower classes who, due to their labour or housing conditions, tend to spend more time outside or on the streets than the middle classes. Finally, his ostensibly compassionate acknowledgement that those scratching are probably ‘unaware’ of what they are doing patronisingly paints the lower classes as unable to think for themselves and in need of enlightenment – we cannot help but be reminded here of the colonial mission civilisatrice, but, in this instance, written by an Indian man who, by mobilising classist and
colonial rhetoric, is able to distance himself from such practices and thus reaffirm his own middle-classness.

Returning to the documents provided by the NGO, considering that this course is aimed at students over the age of 15, and, indeed, the majority of the students who participated in the study were aged between 17 and 50, the inclusion of lessons on hygiene practices is an infantilising act – a common colonial practice (McElhinny 2005) – as there is an implicit assumption that such practices need to be taught to what are, in practice, classes of adults, a large number of whom are parents themselves. If the NGO deems such ‘basic’ hygiene education necessary, there is an assumption that students may not be practising them at home thus positioning the target audience of the NGO as potentially unhygienic. It also has the consequence of reproducing socially harmful paternalist discourses about the poor, which have echoes of the technologies of subordination and discipline via health care interventions that were common to the colonial era. Such technologies helped to rationalise the colonial project while also creating “racialized hierarchies” which were then often intensified further for the ‘lower classes’ (McElhinny 2005: 185).

We are not only dealing here with the continuing effects of colonialism. Rather, colonial values, technologies and the ensuing stratification are entangled within local hierarchies. Indeed, concepts of hygiene are polemical in India and perhaps more politically loaded than anywhere else, given the historical conditions under which they have been mobilised. Many scholars have demonstrated how shifting understandings of hygiene emerged from colonial governance (Fernandes 2006; Kaviraj 1997; Pennycook 1998) and orientalist discourses (Said 1995), from models “concerned with maintaining caste order and purity” (Doron 2016), from modernist conceptualisations of civic responsibility (ibid; see also Doron and Raja 2015; Prasad 2015) and, more recently – as we saw with the bodily scratching example – as part of maintaining or aspiring to a middle class identity (Fernandes 2006). While hygiene may appear a self-evident, innocuous concept, Doron (2016) draws on the growing incitement (largely present on social media) for civic action that has accompanied the government’s Swachh Bharat (Clean India) campaign to make a critical point. Although, as he writes, “the alternative future of clean Indian cities, imagined and enacted in the present by the cumulative efforts of
youth across India, is laudable”, it is imperative to interrogate what is considered ‘unclean’. Referring to the situation as a ‘hygiene war’, he states:

the victor could declare other usages of public space and regimes of value over what is considered public space and what is seen as ‘dirt’ (for example, Un-Hindu, gendered or class-based), and then potentially follow through with a physical campaign of ‘cleansing’ (2016:737-738)

This has further implications for who is considered a legitimate citizen, who forms part of the “useless”, “threatening” population (Brosius 2010:128), and who can make a hegemonic claim to represent the ‘public interest’. Indeed, the violence that erupted across Delhi in early 2020 following the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act is indicative of these tensions.

While I do not wish to infer that this is the intention of the NGO, the emphasis placed on hygiene in classes draws attention to what Doron (2016) terms a middle-class anxiety of cleanliness, as well as to the modes of disciplining subjects which have been inherited from colonialism, which, albeit perhaps not intentionally, inform the NGO’s practice. Through its training programme, it aims to produce students who are not only physically ‘clean’ in their bodies, but also responsible civic citizens who clean up after themselves, and, notably, who use ‘clean language’: a poster drawn by students reads “I keep by body fresh and clean, I clean up after myself, I use clean language, I clean up my mistakes” (Figure 8.3). Once again, the intricate weaving together of language and non-linguistic behaviour becomes clear. English speakers are ‘clean’ in their body, their behaviour and their language. In conversation with Amir one morning, he remarked on how he is increasingly seeing more children speaking English from an early age in India. He recounted an anecdote where he saw a young girl being
accompanied home from school by a (presumed\textsuperscript{13} non-English speaking) maid and the maid’s son. While the maid and her son proceeded to walk through a muddy section of the road, the young girl shouted – in English – “I am not going from that dirty way. I’ll go from the clean way”. Similarly, in an interview with Dev, the member of staff I befriended at the hostel, I asked him to describe English speakers in India. His choice of example was revealing, as he mentions not only a specific ‘body language’ but also their purported intolerance for ‘dirt’:

They have even the body language and when they speak it’s like (puts on ‘educated Indian’ accent) no no no I would not go there/ oh it’s so yucky or it’s so dirty (laughs) (returns to usual accent) or something like this/but a normal person will be like oh it’s bad/ it’s ok/ it’s ok/ we can just go from the other side it’s fine (laughs)

In this imagined scenario the English speaker refuses to walk through a dirty space. The ‘normal person’ in the scenario also chooses not to walk there but, importantly, they do not pass extensive comment or express disgust; they do not perform their affective reaction to dirt. The English speakers as imagined by Dev and as observed by Amir, however, do. The point here is certainly not to imply that those who speak English necessarily do have a lower tolerance for areas deemed to be dirty; the point is that they are recurrently constructed as doing so. Indeed, as Ahmed writes, through such emotional responses to objects and others, “surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others” (2014: 10). These affective orientations – disgust, for example – are deeply political and historical, working “to shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies” (Ahmed 2006:3), thus upholding power structures.

In the NGO, the ways in which these bodily behaviours are framed often use seemingly neutral qualifiers such as ‘proper’ or ‘normal’ (for example, the ‘proper manners’ referred to in the student textbook), indicating

\textsuperscript{13} This was Amir’s assumption, and while he is likely to be correct, the fact that he was able to make an assumption of both the language abilities and occupation of the woman, as well as her relationship to the young girl (maid) and boy (mother) is indicative of who does and does not ‘look’ like an English speaker in India.
that there is indeed a morally, ethically, right and normal way to behave. Yet, what counts as ‘proper’ or ‘normal’ is political and mediated by ideology and history. ‘Proper’ here, then, becomes a euphemism for behaviour that accords with the value systems of the dominant. In other words, while the NGO course may indeed be an exercise in the cultivation of a neoliberal self, it is also an exercise in the cultivation of a particular subjectivity through the acquisition of bodily and moral dispositions and cultural capital associated with a certain group of English speakers, an imagined ideal inherited from colonialism and built on the exclusionary practices (Fernandes 2006) of the middle classes and upper castes.

8.4 Conclusion
As I was working on the analysis for the preceding argument, I came across an Indian film, Chopsticks (2019), which tells the story of an impressionable young woman in Mumbai who unwittingly gets involved with gangsters. In one scene, the young woman walks nervously toward her boss at a company event in a trendy bar to make a work-related request. Her (English) speech is noticeably ‘marked’ as Indian – through her accent, the use of the discourse marker ‘only’, and her use of head tilts while speaking. The boss, an Indian woman in her late 30s, is unimpressed. She looks up from her iPhone, rolls her eyes and sighs as the young woman asks her if she does ‘work-outing’. The boss’s hair is cropped and dyed a purplish-red; she wears a fashionable, traditional Indian nose chain, which appears to be worn less for traditional purposes and more as a stylish ‘ethnic chic’ accessory, and which contrasts with her low-cut Western-style dress. She speaks with a much less marked Indian accent than the young woman. As the young woman asks why she is constantly rebuffed from the better projects at work, the boss replies, exasperated:

Work on yourself//as in how to carry yourself//how to speak//for example//it’s not work-outing//it’s working out//like it’s not /bæl/, it’s /bɔːl/ //You really need to groom yourself.
The boss excuses herself and leaves, visibly annoyed. The young woman catches sight of herself in the mirror opposite, and glumly adjusts her shoulder strap.

On watching this, I was struck by the parallels between this scene and what I have argued is happening in the NGO. The film is revealing of the complexities alluded to above of speaking English in India. Both women are English-medium educated, both use predominantly English in their careers. Yet, something is seemingly not quite ‘right’ about the young woman. She doesn’t quite speak right; she doesn’t quite carry herself right. She is not performing as an English speaker in the appropriate way, and she suffers the consequences in her career.

The young woman’s plight echoes in many ways what I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter – that is, how there have come to exist specific ideas of social types attached to differentiated languages in India. Beginning with a brief overview of the indexicalities and social types associated with Hindi and local languages, and how these types can shift through the process of fractal recursivity depending on what they are being compared with, I have argued that the personhoods attached to different languages in India are organised along an axis of differentiation that contrasts both rudeness and politeness and, by extension, ‘civilised-ness’. By shedding light on these contrasts, I have been able to demonstrate how English comes to be perceived as an “agent of transformation” (Jayadeva 2018:606), that is, by learning the language students understand themselves to embody and occupy the characteristics that are associated with the language (politeness, open-mindedness, progressiveness). Indeed, I have argued that this is not only framed as an agent of transformation but is seen to be a vital part of performing English speakerhood: like the young woman in Chopsticks, speaking English without the accompanying moral and bodily dispositions reduces the value of the linguistic capital. The NGO, as I have demonstrated, appears to have (implicitly) understood this, and thus has developed a programme that attempts to work on the students’ ‘personality development’ through the teaching of English by (attempting to) transform their habitus and inculcating within them a series of connected cultural capital (moral values, bodily movements) in order to make them potentially more employable and to ingratiate them into (upper) middle class India. Thus, this shows how for
people on the ground, to ‘cash in’ on one’s English capital requires extra-
linguistic behaviours that distance oneself from those associated with the
lower castes and classes, and which are framed as obtainable only through
English. This process, as I have shown, is inextricably bound up in both caste
and class stratification, based as it is on the exclusionary practices of the
(upper) middle classes, and is further informed by both colonial practices and
notions of the moral implications of language education. Thus, rather
ironically, English speakerhood makes claims to a progressive modernity by
ostensibly eschewing ‘narrow-mindedness’ and oppressive structures, while
simultaneously upholding and normalising processes of stratification that
endow English speakers with a ‘justified’ supremacy that emanates from their
perceived behavioural and moral superiority, constructed as inherent to the
language itself.
Chapter 9 – Conclusion: English, keys and locked doors

My doctoral journey began in 2016 with a question about how differentially positioned Indians were able – or not – to ‘appropriate’ English. The reader will have noticed the traces of such an interest in Chapter 5, but they will hopefully have also noticed how, in the end, the thesis became part of something much bigger. It became, ultimately, an exploration of the how, who and why of discourses of English for social mobility. This development stemmed from my first site visit to the NGO, whereupon it became clear to me that the role these students imagined English playing in their lives extended far beyond whether or not they considered it ‘their’ language. Having taught English (and French) at a school in northwest India for four and a half years prior to this, I was, of course, highly aware of the coveting of English in India. I saw how the less financially stable parents sacrificed a great deal to fund the private, English-medium education for their children in the hopes of securing for them a bright future. What I had not done was question this taken for granted ‘frenzy’ for English. By this, I don’t mean that I had not questioned how it fuelled inequality – that much is easy to spot – but rather, I hadn’t thought to ask exactly how, what and why English means, and for whom. On the first visit to one of the NGO branches in April 2018, I met Malav, a young man who had left his home state alone to find work in the hotel industry in Delhi. He had been trying and failing to secure a job for over a year, and so he turned to the NGO. He was a charming, confident young man, excited to tell me all about what he had learnt on the course. They think we can’t be good, he told me. But English is my key. He was called back to participate in a group activity before I could ask who they, and indeed we were. But the metaphor he chose to use stayed with me for a long time. Metaphors are not unimportant; they frame, organise and naturalise our understanding of concepts, and English is often reified through a whole host of metaphors that contain within them different ideological underpinnings (Saraceni & Cushing: under review). English is my key. How has English come to be seen as an object that one either has, or does not have? Who is the keeper of the keys? What is behind the door? Is he trying to enter a room, or exit one? Will the key fit? To talk about English and its associations with social mobility in India appears to be rather a statement of the obvious, but by accepting the obviousness of this, we gloss
over the nuances of the various things that English means, in a linguistic, indexical and pragmatic sense. It is not enough to ask questions about whether English leads to social mobility – as critical scholars we know this to be somewhat complicated – but rather, we need to ask why this discourse is so unshakeable, when and if the cracks appear, who it interpellates (and doesn’t), and with what consequences. When we do not ask such questions, we prevent ourselves from imagining that it could be otherwise, because imagining otherwise requires first of all a solid handle of the intricacies, power and weakness of the discourse and how it is embedded within a multiplicity of logics. Without an understanding of this, we risk falling into the trap of reproducing inequality through other, newer forms. This reaches far beyond the realm of ‘English’: it forces us to ask questions about how languages more generally come to be framed as ‘keys’; to ask what promises language – or languages – hold for particular people, at specific times, within certain conditions, as well as how, and why. What futures, personhoods, possibilities have come to be ‘promised’ through the acquisition of languages?

When we do ask such questions, as I have sought to do throughout this thesis, it becomes relatively clear that the English-for-social-mobility discourse is not really about English. Not, at least, in any intrinsic way. It is not really about English because, if history had been different, I might have been writing about the inequality reproduced through any one of a number of other languages. (If history had been different, I may not even have been writing about (or in) a constructed, bounded language at all). It is not really about English because if we remove the unequal distribution of English from the equation – if, for example, English was mandated as a compulsory first language for every schoolchild in India, even with equally adequate levels of teaching and support – I am not convinced that inequality, stratification and hierarchy would suddenly disappear. But these rather ahistorical ‘what if’ ponderings aside, we see that it’s not really about English because, at its core, this is a story about individual actors living in webs of layered social stratification who attempt to renegotiate their social positioning by using what they have learnt to see as a tool to access far more – yes, jobs and money, but more than that, a transformed self. This does not mean, of course, that English is either irrelevant or unimportant. As I have tried to show, English means a great deal. But the way it means is slippery, context-contingent, and
inextricable from the social stigma, marginalisation and economic struggle that many young Indians in Delhi face.

I hope, through this thesis, to have provided an answer to the question of how young, disenfranchised Indians in Delhi come to imagine English as a means of social mobility. In Chapter 5, I argued that, before seeing what English means – the signified – we had to first look at what English is – the signifier. This was not an attempt to reify the concept of English, but rather to understand the discursive construction of ‘good English’. As I come to the end of writing this thesis, I realise that the question I asked here was perhaps framed in the wrong way. More important than the discursive construction of good English, is the construction of bad English. As I have shown, their understanding of (il)legitimate English(es) is fundamentally shaped through Herderian language ideologies (Bauman & Briggs 2003), as well as through the ideology of self-deprecation (Park 2009) which shapes India as a nation of incompetent speakers of English. However, I have also attempted to contribute to scholarly work on the coloniality of English on a global scale by complexifying this further and demonstrating how these particular speakers’ relationality to the language is not only constrained through their ideas of nation, language ownership and authority, but also through local forms of social stratification. That is, the students’ devalorisation of their own ways of speaking English is also the result of wider circulating discourses that paint these students – particularly through their class and caste positions – as unintelligent, uneducated, incompetent speakers of English. Through these discourses, and through the way in which the teaching in the NGO cultivates what I have called a culture of correction, they are positioned as deficient speakers in constant need of ‘correction’ which thus leads to a deeply rooted corrective habitus within the students that pushes them to strive for a rather vague idea of ‘good’ English attached to nebulous signifiers such as ‘British’ or ‘American’. These findings thus highlight the importance of examining how multiple logics work together – here, coloniality and internal social stratification – so as not to erase important elements of inequality or slip too quickly into celebratory (Tupas & Rubdy 2015) discourses. They also push us to be cautious and reflective in our calls to use local vernaculars or encourage fluidity in the English classroom, particularly given the discursive rejection of this by these students, which is fuelled by their recognition of the damaging
social and economic consequences of using stigmatised forms of the language that students in marginalised positions in particular may face.

This foregrounds what I consider a key argument of this thesis: that the specific positioning and life trajectories of students must be taken into account if we are to avoid homogenising young Indians’ experiences of/ with English. In Chapter 6, I sought to contribute to scholarly literature that addresses language and employability by adopting an affect lens, in order to look at how the students’ investment in English was not only one that was premised on a logic of profit (Duchène & Heller 2012) which shapes English as a disembodied resource capable of bestowing benefits indiscriminately upon any and all of its speakers, but also one that foresaw affective returns in the shape of pride and a sense of justice. This latter dimension is only made visible when we shed light on how the students – through their caste, gender or religion – have been positioned as unworthy, as lesser than, and how English, through its indexicalities, comes to be seen as that which can give them value – not only economic, but also social, affective value. I hope to have contributed to discussions that critically investigate ideologies of language-as-resource by demonstrating how discourses for social mobility in India not only reinforce the perceived power of English, but also delineate who English-for-social-mobility is imagined as possible for, in ways that are linked to discourses of class, caste and gender. The social positioning of the students, I have argued, is also a key factor in determining who is able to ‘resist’ – or struggle against – discourses that circulate the importance of English. By raising these moments of attempted discursive struggle (when indeed it does happen), we are able to see how they are ultimately subsumed by discourses of modernity that frame resistance to English as a ‘thing of the past’.

While the students certainly embraced English – this is to be expected in a programme in which they have willingly enrolled – this did not mean that they accepted uncritically the premise of English as a means for social mobility. In Chapter 7, I sought to respond to calls to interrogate further the “uptake” (Urla 2019) of neoliberalism in language education. Through the notion of fluctuating capital, I reiterated the importance of ensuring Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic capital is not applied in isolation from his other, connected concepts – here, primarily field and habitus – which is unfortunately sometimes the case in research on education. By demonstrating
how students are socialised into a ‘skills register’, but simultaneously find
various outlets through which to question such logics, I argued that the
‘performance’ of a neoliberal subjectivity in class does not necessarily mean one
fully endorses it. In calling attention to the oscillation between
investment/hope and scepticism/despair on the part of participants who
raised concerns about social stigma and the discriminatory nature of the job
market, I attempted to provide a nuanced contribution to how we understand
neoliberalism working on the ground, that is, dynamically and in tandem with
other logics, with which it both co-exists and clashes. This breeds a tension
between discourses of empowerment and freedom through English, and the
students’ various lived experiences of oppression. Examining such tensions –
as well as how they are managed, and how one or the other is able to claim
hegemony – I believe, is crucial not only to gain a handle on the workings of
neoliberalisation, but also to see how neoliberalism becomes embedded
within other projects that further reinforce it – in this case, the project of
modernity, in which Indians are exhorted to frame their oppression and
potential mobility in terms of class, and thus as an individual obstacle that can
be overcome purely through hard work, while ‘un-modern’ regimes of
hierarchy (i.e. caste) are deemed unfit to be spoken, despite them nevertheless
continuing to shape the way these participants move through the world.

The oscillation, scepticism and humorous attempts to flag up unequal
power relations that arose led me to ask why these students nevertheless
continued to seemingly ‘invest’ in English. Discourses of modernity that erase
caste and other forms of social stratification were not entirely hegemonic in
the NGO – rather, they were part of a discursive struggle that I witnessed both
students and staff engaging in. This alone, then, cannot account for why my
participants desired English. Linking back to the affective relationships the
students had with English, in Chapter 8 I asked why English was considered
able to provide them with more self-worth. Beyond its indexicalities of
education, wealth and modernity, I demonstrated how English is perceived
by the students as an “agent of transformation” (Jayadeva 2018:606). The main
contribution of this thesis, I argue, is this interrogation of the power of
linguistic capital itself, and the ensuing argument that such capital, in India at
least, only maintains value when it is presented alongside a whole host of
associated cultural capital that it is seen as indissociable from. It is English
speakerhood, not English, that is valued, sought after and taught. English is imagined not only to inculcate within the students a particular subjectivity (in both mind and body), but also as the only means of accessing this. On inspection, we see how the associated capital that is imagined as accessible uniquely through English is built upon colonial hierarchies and technologies as well as the exclusionary practices of the upper middle classes and upper castes. The students thus come to understand themselves as ‘growing’ through their English education into fundamentally ‘better’ people. When we recall the stigmatisation of the caste, religious, or gendered positions of many of my participants, and the contrasting social types attached to Hindi and local languages, it is therefore unsurprising that the students continue to pursue English education, regardless of their occasional scepticism of the neoliberal project, as English continues to be framed as the only means by which to become a worthy, respectable member of (middle class) modern India. This should be of real concern to those of us involved in the design of such programmes, forcing us to ask what agendas are served, in whose interests they work, and the forms of (unrealistic?) hope that they instil in young, marginalised people.

All in all, we see then how the simple equation of English for social mobility is in fact a deeply complex web of logics that bring together – sometimes in conflicting ways – ideologies and discourses of neoliberalism, modernity, colonialism, class, caste, gender, religion, rurality, language and education. It is fraught with tensions that are continually negotiated by the students as they seek to become English speakers. But despite the tensions and inconsistencies, English somehow always emerges as the answer. Whether one is looking to acquire a job, self-esteem, or a morally ‘superior’ way of being in the world, all that appears to be needed is English. It is the sure-fire solution that is preferable to answering difficult questions about who is allowed to succeed in India, who is prevented from doing so, and indeed, what success even looks like. In a circular embedding of logics that are stacked one upon the other, wherever you turn, English always appears to be the way to prevail, and language thus becomes the central object of discussion. I am sure that many students do find themselves in better situations as they become more competent in the language – employment, for example, in stable work in the service industry that provides better pay and more benefits than they
may have otherwise been able to access. I do not wish, at all, to belittle the importance of this for young people in precarious economic situations. What remains to be seen, however, is whether the (potential) upward mobility of these students can lead to a diminishment of inequality and stratification on a wider scale, that is, to a destabilisation of the structures of caste and class (as well as gender, religion and rurality) that have marginalised these students to begin with. I remain sceptical. When language is seen as the unique obstacle to/means for social mobility for individuals – and not what language has become a \textit{terrain for} – then the answer will only ever appear to reside in language solutions, instead of in a deeper, more radical upheaval of social organisation. When we weave narratives of English as the master key, we distract ourselves from asking why the doors were locked in the first place.

* 

There are stories that I have not been able to tell, and stories that I am yet to hear. I was, as mentioned, limited in what I could do and observe in my fieldwork through time and financial constraints. The thesis was also limited, albeit necessarily due to the scope of a PhD project, to all things ‘English’. I have not been able to meaningfully account for how the discourses I have interrogated exist alongside and in tension with an emerging (although not new) right-wing Hindu nationalism that struggles against, \textit{inter alia}, what English speakerhood represents, in order to (re)define nationhood and citizenship in India. The growth of Hindutva and its implicit/explicit endorsement by the Indian government is increasingly concerning. Further research is required on how these two ideological projects – Hindutva and what we might call global modernity – are indexically mapped onto Hindi and English, how indeed languages can come to represent such projects, and how the two projects compete for hegemony in a country that, over 70 years after independence, continues to engage in struggles over what India and Indian \textit{does} and \textit{should} mean. More than mapping how the government and the opposition party seek to enact this on a policy level, my interest lies in how disenfranchised students seeking upward mobility navigate the two, negotiating what the two paths could bring for them, how they are swayed to one or the other, between the two, or to alternatives.
In the immediate future, my interests lie with the question of *what now?* Since August 2020 I have been in regular contact with management of the NGO, sharing with them elements of my data that I feel they should be aware of. This is a tense process, as we approach the conversation from very different perspectives. While this thesis has cast a critical gaze on the practices of the NGO, I nevertheless have a profound respect for them for attempting to provide concrete, practical help to students who have very few other alternatives for support. The problem that arises for me, however, is how the programme inadvertently – and perhaps despite itself – reproduces inequality and shapes students’ subjectivities in problematic ways. I do not believe that this is a question that extends uniquely to this project; I believe that I pose here questions that are integral to the nature of critical research itself, questions about why we do what we do. It can often feel as if we are faced with two choices: we can either attempt to help more people acquire the keys, or we can burn the whole house down. In a recent special issue, Kraft and Flubacher (2020) raise precisely this dilemma, asking whether we can ever empower (with all of its problematic assumptions) students in a fundamentally unequal society. This is a conversation that is bound to be fraught with guilt, optimism, anxiety and determination. It is a conversation that I hope will continue, because imagining and building an alternative, more just world stands in tension with action in the here-and-now that seeks to make things slightly better *within* unfair conditions, and solutions, I maintain, can only be borne collectively.

I do not have the answer to this. I can only ask myself what my options are: to engage with the NGO in collaborative dialogue, or to end my relationship with them upon the submission of this thesis. I will opt for the former and will have to negotiate the tensions that this brings, between a frustration at the inequalities (inadvertently?) perpetuated by the NGO, and an acknowledgement of how their commitment to providing this free service to disenfranchised young people in Delhi is potentially making life just that bit better for the students who walk through their doors.
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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Typology of data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Type</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observational data</td>
<td>Daily visits over 3 months (Mon-Fri); visits 3-5 hours (or duration of the event)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- classroom interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- break-times</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- graduation ceremony</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- facilitator training courses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- facilitator lunch meetings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- final exams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- mock exams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants interviewed- from the NGO</td>
<td>9 (4 male, 5 female; 2 teachers, 1 volunteer, 6 students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants interviewed- not from the NGO</td>
<td>2 (both male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Recordings</td>
<td>9.5 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class/discussion recordings</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcribed interviews</td>
<td>500+ pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field notes</td>
<td>75 pages (typed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field journal</td>
<td>30 pages (typed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Data</td>
<td>188 photographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricula</td>
<td>2 (Book 5 – the final book - old and new versions) Students workbooks (photographed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website data</td>
<td>Various pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic data</td>
<td>Age, education, occupation, parents’ education, parents’ occupation, home responsibilities – provided by the NGO (information taken from students at enrolment)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 2 – Interview and recording timelines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Interview dates</th>
<th>Topic of recording</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mohit (student – male, 22)</td>
<td>24 Oct 30 Oct</td>
<td>Discussion of certification process</td>
<td>26 Nov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdul (volunteer – male, 24)</td>
<td>2 Nov 6 Nov 13 Nov</td>
<td>‘Question of the day’</td>
<td>29 Nov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amir (facilitator – male, 26)</td>
<td>1 Dec 21 Dec</td>
<td>Error tracking</td>
<td>30 Nov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnav (student – male, 17)</td>
<td>12 Nov 20 Dec</td>
<td>Pre + post mock interview (part I)</td>
<td>10 Dec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rupal (facilitator – female, 22)</td>
<td>9 Nov 20 Nov</td>
<td>Pre + post mock interview (part II)</td>
<td>10 Dec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakshi (student – female, 20)</td>
<td>30 Oct (recording failed – burst pipe) 5 Nov 9 Nov</td>
<td>Mentor Session</td>
<td>11 Dec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shama (student – female, 18)</td>
<td>20 Nov</td>
<td>Book discussion (exam preparation)</td>
<td>12 Dec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binita (student – female, 35+)</td>
<td>29 Nov</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anjali (student – female, 40+)</td>
<td>29 Nov</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dev (hostel staff – male, 26)</td>
<td>9 Dec</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaidehi (student – female, 19)</td>
<td>27 Dec</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My workshop I</td>
<td>18 Dec</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My workshop II</td>
<td>19 Dec</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifelong learning class</td>
<td>27 Dec</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of gender</td>
<td>28 Dec</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as an International Language discussion</td>
<td>3 Jan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government and Private Schools discussion</td>
<td>4 Jan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3 – Transcript conventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AB:</th>
<th>Named speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/</td>
<td>Short pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>//</td>
<td>Pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(x)</td>
<td>Inaudible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[...]</td>
<td>Section omitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>word</strong></td>
<td>Emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>italics</em></td>
<td>Language other than English used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[word]</td>
<td>Translation or gloss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(laughs)</td>
<td>Non-linguistic utterance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 4 – Ethical approval

<Redacted for submission to thesis repository due to inclusion of sensitive material>
Appendix 5 – Consent form

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.

Project Title: Navigating English: an ethnographic study of perceptions of English in an Indian NGO

About the study:
The aim of this study is to explore the attitudes and perceptions of English held by students in different educational institutions, and from different socio-economic backgrounds. If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to take part in group and individual interviews. Classes at your educational institution will also be observed by the researcher. You will remain anonymous in the study.

Researcher:
Katy Highet is a PhD student at the Institute of Education, University College London. She has previously worked as an English and French teacher in India, and completed her Master’s research on the role of English in India.

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research. Before you agree to take part, the person organising the research must explain the project to you. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you to decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

Participant’s Statement
I agree that:

• I have read the notes written above and the Information Sheet, and understand what the study involves.
• I understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish to take part in this project, I can notify the researchers involved and withdraw immediately.
• I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study.
• I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.
• I agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in this study.

Name:
Signature:
Date:
Navigating English: an ethnographic study of perceptions of English in an Indian NGO

September 2018 – January 2019

Information sheet for _____________________

Who is conducting the research?
My name is Katy Highet and I am inviting you to take part in my research project, Navigating English: an ethnographic study of perceptions of English in an Indian NGO. I am a PhD student at the Institute of Education at University College London, a world-leading university for Education and Social Science research. I have previously worked as an English teacher in India, where I also conducted similar research projects on the role of English in India.

I am hoping to explore the attitudes towards and perceptions of English held by students from different educational institutions and different socio-economic backgrounds.

I very much hope that you would like to take part. This information sheet will try and answer any questions you might have about the project, but please don’t hesitate to contact me if there is anything else you would like to know.

Why are we doing this research?
This research project is aiming to explore how students from different socio-economic backgrounds feel about the English language. I am interested in hearing the opinions of students from a wide-range of backgrounds, as this has not yet been fully researched. I believe it is important to ensure that a diverse range of voices are heard, as research projects such as this one can have an impact on educational policy in the country.

Why am I being invited to take part?
You are being asked to take part as you are a student of English in [NGO name] educational establishment, and the researcher is interested in your opinions on the English language in India.

What will happen if I choose to take part?
If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in informal interviews with the researcher, both individually and in groups. The interviews will take place on a weekly basis, for 30-60 minutes. You will not be expected to attend every interview, but will be encouraged to participate as often as possible. The interviews will be mainly discussion-based, but you may occasionally be given videos or activities to complete and discuss. You are not being tested or evaluated on your answers or your language skills. The topic of the interviews will be the English language.
Potential questions may be:
*Why are you learning English?*
*How is English important to you?*
*Do you feel that English is an Indian language?*

Your English classes in your educational establishment will also be observed by the researcher. The audio from the interviews and the classroom observations will be recorded on a Dictaphone.

**Will anyone know I have been involved?**
Your name, the school name and the local area will be anonymised so that your identity is not disclosed. You will be provided with a pseudonym.

**Could there be problems for me if I take part?**
There are no expected risks associated with this study. However, if you feel uncomfortable at any point, you may withdraw your consent.

**What will happen to the results of the research?**
The results of the study will be disseminated through the PhD thesis, as well as through conference papers and journal articles. Your details will be anonymised so that you cannot be identified. Data from the interviews will be stored securely on password-protected disks.

**Do I have to take part?**
It is entirely up to you whether or not you choose to take part. We hope that if you do choose to be involved then you will find it a valuable experience.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet. If you would like to be involved, please complete the following consent form and return to Katy Highet by ____________. If you have any further questions before you decide whether to take part, you can reach me at <email address>

This project has been reviewed and approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee.
Appendix 7 – Information sheet (Hindi)

नेविगेटिंग इन्फो: एक भारतीय गैर सरकारी संगठन, अंग्रेजी की धारणाओं का एक नृविश्वव्यापी अध्ययन सितंबर 2018 - जनवरी 2019

के लिए सूचना पत्रक

शोध कौन कर रहा है?
मेरा नाम केटी हिजेट है और मैं आपको अपनी शोध परियोजना में भाग लेने के लिए आमंत्रित कर रही हूँ, अंग्रेजी नेविगेटिंग: एक भारतीय गैर सरकारी संगठन में, अंग्रेजी की एक नृविश्वव्यापी अध्ययन धारणाएं। मैं सूचना सेंटर कॉलेज रंगन में शिक्षा संस्थान में पीएचडी छात्रा हूँ, जो शिक्षा और सामाजिक विज्ञान अनुसंधान के लिए एक विश्वव्यापी विश्वविद्यालय है। मैं पहले भारत में एक अंग्रेजी शिक्षक के रूप में काम किया हूँ, जहां मैं भारत में अंग्रेजी की भूमिका पर भी इसी तरह की शोध परियोजनाएं आयोजित की जा रही हैं।

में विभिन्न शैक्षिक संस्थानों और विभिन्न सामाजिक-आर्थिक पृष्ठभूमि से छात्रों द्वारा आयोजित अंग्रेजी की प्रतिबिंब और दृष्टिकोण का पता लगाने की उम्मीद कर रही हूँ।

मुझे बहुत उम्मीद है कि आप मेरी शोध परियोजना में हिस्सा लेना चाहेंगे। यह सूचना पत्र परियोजना के बारे में आपके किसी भी प्रश्न का उत्तर देने और जवाब देने का प्रयास करेगा, लेकिन यदि आप कुछ और जानना चाहते हैं तो कृपया मुझसे संपर्क करने में सहयोग करें।

कृपया चर्चा करें कि आप भाग लेना चाहते हैं या नहीं। कृपया आप यदि यह लेख रखें आपके पास किसी भी समय कोई नकारात्मक नतीजे नहीं होने पर शोध से अपना नामांकन वापस लेने का विकल्प है। में भी कार्य / साक्षात्कार से पहले चर्चा करें और उन्हें याद दिलाएं।

हम यह शोध कैसे कर रहे हैं?
यह शोध परियोजना यह जानने का लक्ष्य रख रही है कि अलग-अलग सामाजिक-आर्थिक पृष्ठभूमि के छात्र अंग्रेजी भाषा के बारे में कैसा महसूस करते हैं। मुझे पृष्ठभूमि की विस्तृत श्रृंखला से छात्रों की राय सुनने में विस्तृत है, क्योंकि अभी तक पूरी तरह से शोध नहीं किया गया है। मेरा मानना है कि यह सुनिश्चित करना महत्वपूर्ण है कि विभिन्न फाइल की आवाजें सुनाई जाएं। क्योंकि इस तरह की शोध परियोजनाओं का देश में शैक्षणिक नीति पर असर पड़ सकता है।

मुझे भाग लेने के लिए कैसे आमंत्रित किया जा रहा है?
आपको भाग लेने के लिए कहा जा रहा है क्योंकि आप [NGO NAME] में अंग्रेजी के छात्र हैं, और शोधकर्ताओं भारत में अंग्रेजी भाषा पर अपनी राय में रूचि रखती है।

अगर आप भाग लेने का चुनाव करते हैं तो क्या होगा?
यदि आप भाग लेने का चुनाव करते हैं, तो आपको अलग-अलग और समूहों दोनों में शोधकर्ता के साथ अनौपचारिक साक्षात्कार में भाग लेने के लिए कहा जाएगा। साक्षात्कार 30-60 मिनट के लिए पकड़कर आधार पर होगा। उनसे हर साक्षात्कार में भाग लेने की उम्मीद नहीं की जाएगी, लेकिन जितनी बार संभव हो सके भाग लेने के लिए प्रोत्साहित किया जाएगा। साक्षात्कार मुख्य रूप से चर्चा-आधारित होगा, लेकिन आप व्यक्तिगत
वीडियो और गतिविधियों को पूरा करने और चर्चा करने के लिए दिया जा सकता है। आपके परीक्षण या आपके भाषा कोशल पर आपके परीक्षण या मूल्यांकन नहीं किया जा रहा है। साक्षात्कार का विषय अंग्रेजी भाषा होगी।

संभावित प्रश्न हो सकते हैं।
आप अंग्रेजी क्यों सीख रहे हो?
अंग्रेजी आपके लिए महत्वपूर्ण है?
व्यक्ति आपके लिए छोटा है?

व्यक्ति आपके नाम, शाखा का नाम और स्थानीय क्षेत्र को पुनः रख जाएगा ताकि आपकी पहचान का खुलासा न हो। आपके एक उपनाम प्रदान किया जाएगा।

शोध के परिणामों का क्या होगा?
अध्ययन के परिणाम पीएचडी शीसिस के साथ-साथ सम्मेलन पत्रों और जर्नल लेखों के माध्यम से प्रसारित किए जाएंगे। सभी पत्रकारों को अनान्वित किया जाएगा ताकि आपकी पहचान नहीं की जा सके। साक्षात्कार से डेटा पासवर्ड-सुरक्षित डिस्क पर सुरक्षित रूप से संग्रहीत किया जाएगा।

क्या आप भर लेंगे?
यह पूरी तरह से आप पर निर्भर करता है कि आप भाग लेने का चुनाव करते हैं या नहीं। हमें उम्मीद है कि यदि आप शामिल होना चाहते हैं तो आपको एक मूल्यवान अनुभव मिलेगा।

इस सूचना पत्र को पढ़ने के लिए समय निकालने के लिए बहुत बहुत धन्यवाद। आप शामिल होना चाहते हैं, तो निम्न सहमति पत्र को पूरा करने और द्वारा Katy Highet पर लौटाने - ______________ आपके पास कोई प्रवेश नहीं है, तो इससे पहले कि आप भाग लेने के लिए तय करें, आप मुझे <email address> लिख सकते हैं।
यूसीएल आईओई रिसर्च एथिक्स कमेटी द्वारा इस परियोजना की समीक्षा और अनुमोदन किया गया है।
Appendix 8 – Interview guide

Please note these questions were used as a guide only.

Home/trajectory
- Tell me about yourself (education, family)
- English in their family
- Tell me about your community (how is it viewed, who do they consider to be community)
- Have you encountered any challenges in your life? How/why/when?

Motivations
- Why did you join the NGO?
- Why have you stayed?
- What does success mean to you? What is a successful person?
- What do the posters in the NGO mean to you?

English
- Where and with whom do you use English?
- How do you feel about using English with them?
- How do people react when you speak English?
- Has English made any difference in your life? [How] do you think it will help your future?
- How do people see you now that you can speak English?
- Is English important to you? Why/not?
- Can you describe what your life was like before you spoke English?

English in India
- Who speaks English in India? What are those people like?
- When you think of an English speaker what do you imagine?
- Who would you like to speak like?
- What do you think of EM? EM students? Would you send your children?
- What does ‘Indian English’ mean to you? What do you think about Indian English?
- What about Hinglish?
- Why do you think the NGO has a no Hindi rule?
- What happens if you don’t speak English in India?

For Facilitators
- Tell me about the mentor scheme
- Tell me about the students – (how) will this help them?
- Is English enough to help them?
- What other obstacles do they face?
- Do you feel you are making a difference? How?
• What does ‘Indian English’ mean to you? What do you think about Indian English?
• Which standard of English do/should you teach?
• What about Hinglish? Why do you think the NGO has a no Hindi rule?