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INTRODUCTION

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Pedagogies of Aspiration: Anthropological Perspectives on Education in Liberalising India

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ABSTRACT
Through a discussion of the articles in this collection, the introduction explores the ways in which the inhabitations of liberalisation require and necessitate intensive self-fashioning from citizens. We call this protracted work on the self, which unsettles enduring pathways of social reproduction and avenues of social mobility, pedagogies of aspiration. Moving beyond debates about efficient markets versus a redistributive state as the ideal provider of education, we suggest that ethnographic inquiries that foreground the everyday experiences and stakes of fashioning aspirational selves in educational contexts help us understand the lived realities of democratic possibility in liberalising India today.

KEYWORDS
Affective labour; aspiration; education; liberalisation; pedagogy

Introduction

The tragic death of the Dalit student Rohith Vemula at Hyderabad Central University in 2016 and the public outcry that ensued reveals the ways in which education sits at the heart of ideas about democracy and justice in India today.[1] The immediate details of Vemula's suicide link his anti-caste student activism to struggles between the administration of Hyderabad Central University and the ruling, Right-wing Hindu nationalist party as they sought to take punitive action against him and others for their activism. However, it was his suicide note that opened up his tragic death to broader questions about what it means to aspire to new futures in contemporary India. Being 'excluded' by being 'included' was one notable way his plight was rendered. What does it mean for marginalised students to enter spaces of education, schooling themselves for aspirational futures those very same institutions will thwart? The description of Rohith Vemula's death as 'institutional murder' also draws attention to the public university as a space of relative inclusivity, but one fraught with obstacles and hostility. As Janaki Nair argues, the expansion of access to higher education for marginalised groups is one of the greatest achievements of contemporary India. One of its greatest failures is in

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1. Gopinath Arunima, 'Thought, Policies and Politics: How May We Imagine the Public University in India?', in *Kronos*, Vol. 43, no. 1 (2017), pp. 165–84.

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not creating the mechanisms that will address centuries of discrimination within those same institutions.[2] Rohith Vemula's suicide, along with intense and protracted struggles about the functioning and futures of universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University and Jamia Millia Islamia among others, as well as student politics as a key site for contesting the current regime's attempts to amend citizenship rights, have raised the visibility of education as a crucial site for contesting visions of democracy in India. While a top-down managerialism, linked to neo-liberal and corporatised understandings of education, tethers itself to a Right-wing, Hindu nationalist agenda as it seeks to transform the public university, the expanding reach of education intended to bring the formerly excluded into its purview becomes visible.

Moving beyond the hypervisibility of higher education, this special section draws attention to education across multiple levels and sites as key to understanding the lived realities of democratic possibility in liberalising India today. The expansion of higher education through the public university system and state-sponsored reservation policies is but one avenue for the massive expansion of educational endeavours at every scale and in every sector since the liberalisation of the Indian economy. The rise of private universities, the expansion of private, fee-paying schools, and basic computer and English-speaking centres, among many other kinds of educational and training institutions, are just a few examples of a veritable explosion of educational programmes. While much commented upon in policy and popular and political discourse, what the experiences and meanings of this expansion are has been little explored. Much political and policy-oriented discourse frames a discussion of education and liberalisation in terms of a debate between efficient markets versus redistributive state as the best provider of education. While this anchors important policy discussions and ongoing political struggles about education, the framework of markets versus the state tells us little about how students, families and communities are experiencing the massive expansion of education, which is the focus of this special section.

Secondly, while politicised debates about liberalisation crucially centre on (higher) education, an expanding anthropological and sociological literature on liberalisation rarely does. This literature has rightly drawn attention to the expansion of consumer culture in terms of malls, the retail industry, media, film and fashion. Importantly, it has highlighted its aspirational logics, the role of aesthetic self-fashioning, and the dynamics of inequality and social mobility they generate. Yet, what is the relationship between and the stakes of such logics and dynamics and the massive and intensive expansion of educational projects in post-liberalisation India?

This collection proposes that liberalisation has generated an expansion of aspirational trajectories that require and necessitate forms of self-fashioning manifest in forms of aesthetic and affective labour. It is the contention of this issue that these aspirational mobilities become especially crystallised in and through educational projects. As the socially recognised and morally acceptable institution that orients self-fashioning towards secure individual pathways and collective democratic futures, education precariously schools its subjects towards specific kinds of aspirational trajectories. Pedagogies of aspiration are thus constitutive of and (re)constituted by the

2. Janaki Nair, 'The Provocations of the Public University', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, no. 37 (2017), p. 36.

massive expansion of education in contemporary India. This expansion of aspiration must be understood in terms of the uncertainties and precarities of generating social reproduction and mobility. Moving from elite, all-girls' public schools in Rajasthan to NGO-based enterprise training for girls from urban poor communities in New Delhi, the papers highlight aspirational trajectories of 'choice' and 'enterprise' in elite and non-elite educational contexts. Situating basic computer training courses at the edges of India's information technology (IT) industry in the lives of young Muslim women in Hyderabad, personality development workshops among Dalit students in Bengaluru, and school-based community policing efforts in Kerala's experiments with democratic decentralisation, these papers direct attention to the pedagogical dimensions of aspiration in liberalising India across communities.

Rohith Vemula's suicide has thrown into relief not only the immediate political dynamics of struggles over education, but also raised questions about everyday forms of institutional living within a radically transformed public university. In the national public discussion in the wake of the publication of his suicide note, Vemula's struggles to continue his studies, his inability to hold on to his aspirations and dreams while being a student leader, and the toll it took revealed the mutual imbrications between the personal, experiential, the everyday and broader political stakes.[3] Along these lines, this special section highlights *ethnographic* approaches to the study of education in liberalising India. Moving beyond policy and quantitative approaches to education, this collection highlights the everyday experiences and stakes of fashioning aspirational selves in educational contexts in liberalising India.

Liberalisation and pedagogies of aspiration

To situate the aspirational mobilities that animate educational projects in contemporary India, this section presents a select review of the anthropological literature on liberalisation. As alluded to earlier, scholarship on consumer culture and affective labour shows how consumer practices and work expectations train citizens to rehearse potential selves and imagine novel futures. This generalised training in reflective, flexible, experimental selfhoods, or what we call pedagogies of aspiration, is the context in which citizens turn to formal educational projects to manage the possibilities and anxieties of uncertain futures. While the review hints at the specificity of uncertain futures and aspirations, the papers collected here reveal the classed, gendered and caste-ed nature of aspiration in greater detail. Needless to say, the focused nature of the review and its emphasis on learners, or consumers of education, means that we overlook important work that informs analyses of educational provision, especially those pertaining to the restructuring of administrative and legal mechanisms,[4] the

3. Arunima, 'Thought, Policies and Politics', p. 175.
4. Laura Bear and Nayanika Mathur, 'Introduction: Remaking the Public Good: A New Anthropology of Bureaucracy', in *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 33, no. 1 (2015), pp. 18–34; Anuj Bhuwania, *Courting the People: Public Interest Litigation in Post-Emergency India* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Akhil Gupta and Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan (eds), *The State in India after Liberalization: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Delhi: Routledge, 2010); Ursula Rao and Vijayanka Nair, 'Aadhaar: Governing with Biometrics', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, no. 3 (2019), pp. 1–13; and Gerald N. Rosenberg, Sudhir Krishnaswamy and Shishir Bail (eds), *A Qualified Hope: The Indian Supreme Court and Progressive Social Change* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

corporatisation and financialisation of resources and processes,[5] and insightful work on diaspora and transnational influences.[6]

Constantine Nakassis and Llerena Searle's theorisation of the transformations of liberalisation as 'transformations of value'[7] is a useful entry point to understand the implications of deepening consumer culture for aspirational mobility. Drawing on Graeber's insights that expand value beyond the economic (the degree to which objects are desired) to the ways in which 'actions become meaningful to the actor',[8] Nakassis and Searle urge us to consider how consumers engage in 'social value' projects.[9] That is, what are consumers doing by engaging in consumer practices? For instance, young, urban, non-elite men 'wandering' in malls in the National Capital Region (NCR) cultivate 'commodity oriented aspirations and pleasures' that promise inclusion and participation 'in an otherwise segregated city'.[10] Meanwhile, builders constructing spectacular, world-class housing projects in Delhi and Gurgaon in the NCR attempt to appreciate the economic value of their construction projects by figuring the transnational elite professional as the ideal consumer.[11] Far away but close at hand, in Silicon Valley, Indians buy Maggi noodles, Hamam soap, Brahmi Amla hair oil, Glucose biscuits and Amul butter and watch Bollywood movies to recreate an India devoid of class or caste conflicts as they negotiate their racialised position in the United States.[12] Consumer practices thus afford an entire arena for the reflective reconstruction of racialised, gendered and classed selves in relation to others.[13] In the context of liberalisation, the deepening of consumer culture is spawning all kinds of value

5. Geetha B. Nambissan and Stephen J. Ball, 'Advocacy Networks, Choice and Private Schooling of the Poor in India', in *Global Networks*, Vol. 10, no. 3 (2010), pp. 324–43; Amrita Pande, *Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Utpal Niranjan Sandesara, '"A Necessary Sin": An Ethnographic Study of Sex Selection in Western India', PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2017; Llerena Guiu Searle, *Landscapes of Accumulation: Real Estate and the Neoliberal Imagination in Contemporary India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Carol Anne Spreen and Sangeeta Kamat, 'Profiting from the Poor: The Emergence of Multinational Edu-Businesses in Hyderabad, India', in Kenneth J. Saltman and Alexander J. Means (eds), *The Wiley Handbook of Global Educational Reform* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), pp. 199–230; and Kaushik Sunder Rajan, *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
6. Aswin Punathambekar, *From Bombay to Bollywood: The Making of a Global Media Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Purnima Mankekar, *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); and Arjun Shankar, *How Development Feels: Brown Saviors and the Technoracial Politics of India's Help Economy* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, forthcoming).
7. Constantine V. Nakassis and Llerena Guiu Searle, 'Introduction: Social Value Projects in Post-Liberalisation India', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 47, no. 2 (2013), p. 170.
8. David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. xii.
9. Nakassis and Searle, 'Introduction'.
10. Emilija Zabiliute, 'Wandering in a Mall: Aspirations and Family among Young Urban Poor Men in Delhi', in *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 24, no. 3 (2016), p. 273.
11. Llerena Guiu Searle, 'Constructing Prestige and Elaborating the "Professional": Elite Residential Complexes in the National Capital Region, India', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 47, no. 2 (2013), pp. 271–302.
12. Purnima Mankekar, '"India Shopping": Indian Grocery Stores and Transnational Configurations of Belonging', in *Ethnos*, Vol. 67, no. 1 (2002), pp. 75–97; and Aswin Punathambekar, 'Bollywood in the Indian–American Diaspora: Mediating a Transitive Logic of Cultural Citizenship', in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 8, no. 2 (2005), pp. 151–73.
13. Ritty Lukose, *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 5; Melanie Dean, 'From "Evil Eye" Anxiety to the Desirability of Envy: Status, Consumption and the Politics of Visibility in Urban South India', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 47, no. 2 (2013), pp. 185–216; Henrike Donner, *Domestic Goddesses: Maternity, Globalization and Middle-Class Identity in Contemporary India* (Delhi: Routledge, 2016); and Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

transformations, potential selves and futures to normalise aspiration as a form of social belonging.

In fact, scholars argue that ambiguity, ambivalence or the more recognisable term 'uncertainty' is a key driver of neo-liberal capitalist expansion in consumer societies. As profits accruing from commodity production fall, economic value is pursued through the unsettling and reformulating of socio-cultural value.[14] In her keyword essay on neo-liberal agency, Ilana Gershon writes that 'neoliberal perspectives have incorporated as a central belief the knowledge that all that is social could be otherwise'.[15] While the manufacturing of ambivalence drives capitalist expansion and business profit, it also unsettles enduring pathways of social reproduction and inequality. The belief that all that is social could be otherwise also reclaims the future from the domain of fate and destiny, transforming it from a predetermined embodiment organised along caste and gender lines into the realm of possibility and potential.[16] This is especially pertinent for historically-marginalised groups and communities in India since the absence of social security schemes makes social mobility a 'speculative enterprise' for the poor.[17] In effect, the expansion of consumer culture in liberalising India has democratised aspiration.[18]

A second set of literature that gestures toward pedagogies of aspiration is the scholarship on affective and aesthetic labour. The service economies that have accompanied liberalisation alert us to how social interaction is increasingly commodified into marketable skills of all kinds. Picking up food from vendors, cooking homely food and blogging about one's eating habits and dressing styles is a small sample of an ever-increasing array of tasks that one can potentially do for money. Meanwhile, one's perceived attractiveness, dressing style, grooming, voice, accent, attitude and demeanour mediate the possibilities and profits of commodification. The self has to be made presentable to attract potential customers. Explaining the relationships between affective and aesthetic labour, Ashley Mears points to the imbrications of emotion management and presentation work.[19] While affective labour draws attention to the emotional and cultural work entailed in neo-liberal capitalist expansion, aesthetic labour notes the significance of the body and corporeal control for emotion management. For instance, bloggers mould their visual profiles (aesthetic labour) to generate appropriate genres and registers of feeling (affective labour) in order to attract readers and advertisers to their sites.[20] In fact, scholars suggest that aesthetic and affective labours not only *prepare* workers for a market economy, but also *comfort* non-remunerated workers and

14. Lilly Irani, *Chasing Innovation: Making Entrepreneurial Citizens in Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).
15. Ilana Gershon, 'Neoliberal Agency', in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 52, no. 4 (2011), p. 537.
16. Barbara Adam, 'Future Matters: Futures Known, Created and Minded', in *Twenty-First Century Society*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (2008), pp. 111–6.
17. Ravinder Kaur and Nandini Sundar, 'Snakes and Ladders: Rethinking Social Mobility in Post-Reform India', in *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 24, no. 3 (2016), pp. 229–41.
18. Arjun Appadurai, 'The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition', in Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (eds), *Culture and Public Action* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); and William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
19. Ashley Mears, 'Aesthetic Labor for the Sociologies of Work, Gender, and Beauty', in *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 8, no. 12 (2014), pp. 1330–43.
20. Tom Van Nuenen, 'Here I Am: Authenticity and Self-Branding on Travel Blogs', in *Tourist Studies*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (2016), pp. 192–212.

job seekers with feelings of proximity to the labour market to keep hopes of income alive.[21]

The potential commodification of social interaction thus compels work on the self, which generates fertile opportunities for aspirational becomings. In a poignant example, Hemangini Gupta documents how young non-elite women in Bengaluru working at a travel company do pizza-tasting and air travel as they learn to plan travel itineraries for privileged globetrotters. When laid off due to technological innovations, what they lose is not just the income but also the avenue to rehearse desirable personhoods.[22] Similar but different, Sareeta Amrute notes how Indian IT professionals working in Berlin jog, walk through historic sites or plan special excursions to improve themselves. The need for improvement arises from the racialised economies and immigration laws that govern their employability in the West.[23] The complex entanglements of work and leisure, whether it is pizza-tasting as part of a desk job or jogging to become a more focused and cosmopolitan worker, gesture to the labour expended in producing experimental, disciplined selves to accrue potential profit, and the politics generated at the limits of market exchange. On the one hand, the self 'that is produced through an engagement with the market'[24] is obliged to 'manage racial, gendered, class differences' with potential clients by consciously adjusting their 'feeling and bodies at the individual level to generate a sense of security' for the client.[25] Formal lessons in the bodily and affective practices of racial, caste, class and gendered 'others' is thus the proper stuff of 'soft skills training' not just in retail, call centres and corporate offices,[26] but also for those who aspire to participate in these spaces.[27] This proliferation of affective and aesthetic labour confounds previous mechanisms of middle-class formation where pedagogies of class culture were typically unavailable to those from other classes. On the other hand, immigration laws, automation, jobless growth and rising unemployment rates leak aspirational work out of market circulation into the realm of democratic politics. This tangible, oftentimes political, orientation of bodies and affects to uncertain futures in the present is what is entailed in pedagogies of aspiration.

21. Jamie Cross, 'Motivating Madhu: India's SEZs and the Spirit of Enterprise', in Nandini Gooptu (ed.), *Enterprise Culture in Neoliberal India: Studies in Youth, Class, Work, and Media* (Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 124–39; and Meredith Lindsay McGuire, 'The Embodiment of Professionalism: Personality Development Programmes in New Delhi', in Nandini Gooptu (ed.), *Enterprise Culture in Neoliberal India: Studies in Youth, Class, Work, and Media* (Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 109–23.
22. Hemangini Gupta, 'Testing the Future: Gender and Technocapitalism in Start-Up India', in *Feminist Review*, Vol. 123, no. 1 (2020), pp. 74–88.
23. Sareeta Amrute, *Encoding Race, Encoding Class: Indian IT workers in Berlin* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
24. Gershon, 'Neoliberal Agency', p. 539.
25. Saikat Maitra and Srabani Maitra, 'Producing the Aesthetic Self: An Analysis of Aesthetic Skill and Labour in the Organized Retail Industries in India', in *Journal of South Asian Development*, Vol. 13, no. 3 (2018), pp. 337–57.
26. A. Aneesh, *Neutral Accent: How Language, Labor, and Life Become Global* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta, 'Future Tense: Capital, Labor, and Technology in a Service Industry: The 2017 Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture', in *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Vol. 7, no. 3 (2017), pp. 67–87; Smitha Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian: Gender and Culture in a New Transnational Class* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Sarah Saddler, '"Think Differently, Get Creative": Producing Precarity in India's Corporate Theater Culture Industry', in *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Vol. 22, no. 1 (2017), pp. 22–35.
27. Meredith Lindsay McGuire, '"How to Sit, How to Stand": Bodily Practice and the New Urban Middle Class', in Isabelle Clark-Decès (ed.), *A Companion to the Anthropology of India* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 115–36; and David Sancho, 'Escaping India's Culture of Education: Migration Desires among Aspiring Middle-Class Young Men', in *Ethnography*, Vol. 18, no. 4 (2017), pp. 515–34.

The transformations accompanying economic reform thus teach citizens to constantly orient themselves to diverse and even contradictory futures in very tangible ways. While this release from customary gendered, caste futures can be profoundly liberating, it also amplifies the work required to re-produce privilege. It is in this context that education has become a central site for the enactment of aspirational politics. What then are the implications of liberalisation's pedagogies of aspiration and its affective entailments for education research?

To begin with, the sites of education, especially where one can learn to become middle class, have proliferated. Wandering in malls, working in retail jobs, being enticed by advertisements, calling customer care, learning to use a mobile phone, viewing films and television programmes, all of these have to be reconsidered as pedagogic practices. Secondly, when uncertainty is the new repository of value, the moral comfort of certainty, however ephemeral, that formal education offers through the routinisation of the future holds exceptional valence. For instance, scholars of labour note how employees manage the discontents of precarious employment by enrolling in educational programmes.[28] To reject formal education and its promise of self-improvement and a desirable future places too great a moral and emotional burden on the aspiring citizen. One insightful example of the excesses of such an unshared burden is evident in the exceptional labours and investments required of families who home school their children in Bengaluru.[29]

In this context, educators and education researchers have to carefully consider how pedagogies of aspiration recalibrate education as a vehicle for democratic justice. While education scholars tend to advocate for either an efficient market or a redistributive state, the papers in the special section suggest that we need a different register of politics to understand the actually-existing dynamics of educational projects in liberalising India. How should we conceive of education as a mechanism for democratic justice when differentially positioned citizens wholeheartedly embrace new pedagogies of aspiration? The papers in the collection show that while non-elites turn to educational projects to rehearse (im)possible futures through immaterial, affective explorations and experiments, more elite middle classes routinise prosperous futures through resource-intensive, material, spatial expansions that simultaneously advance moral claims for the purposes of reproducing their privilege. It is in and through engaging such aspirational projects that education as a key site for democratic struggle in India today comes into view.

Karishma Desai and Kathryn Zyskowski (this volume) show how empowerment lessons in the form of basic computer skills and life skills training, which target low-income Muslims and Dalits in Hyderabad and Delhi, train young women to experiment with fantasy futures. In these contexts, the distance between imagined futures and the constrained present provides fertile ground for imaginative work in the fleeting spaces of selfies, job descriptions and career-planning workshops.

28. Jamie Cross, 'From Dreams to Discontent: Educated Young Men and the Politics of Work at a Special Economic Zone in Andhra Pradesh', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 43, no. 3 (2009), pp. 351–79; and Orlanda Ruthven, 'Getting Dividend from Demography: Skills Policy and Labour Management in Contemporary Indian Industry', in *Journal of South Asian Development*, Vol. 13, no. 3 (2018), pp. 315–36.
29. Anupama Mahajan, 'Contours of Lived Experiences of Children Identified as Gifted in India', PhD dissertation, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, forthcoming, 2020.

The ephemerality of their practices only serves to reinforce education-inflected aspirations for respectability. In comparison, for the privileged middle classes, increasing uncertainty has intensified education as a site of pedagogic enterprise, which has expanded and displaced classroom learning onto field trips, projects, service opportunities, transnational travel and spectacular theatrical productions. The 'concerted cultivation' that characterises middle-class parenting[30] and age-specific and organised activities that teach embodied forms of entitlement are now institutionally rationalised and operationalised (Chacko, this volume; Chidsey, this volume). The possibility of liberation from the futures of earlier generations is rehearsed in and through the mundane actions of education. Interestingly, the exponential increase in economic and material investment in education is accompanied by a new premium on service learning. When economic privilege is unconcealed in hyper-commodified educational markets, claims to represent and lead society are re-articulated in moral terms. While education has always been a key site for middle-class formation,[31] Mary Ann Chacko and Meghan Chidsey illuminate how the practices and moralities constitutive of middle-class formation are reformulated in times of transition.[32]

To summarise, we conceive of the transformations of liberalisation as the production of 'new arrangements of power and culture'[33] wherein those on the margins of dominant articulations 'are yet fully formed by its structures of aspiration and opportunity'.[34] The seduction of education in liberalising India is its intimate relationship with the 'potential' in a political economic context that has invasively intruded into the realm of potentiality for value generation and capital accumulation.[35] However, the seductions and labours of education are diverse and the articles in the special section alert us to the importance of paying close attention to specific articulations.

Education research: Inclusion/exclusion and provision/consumption

The following section briefly reviews trends in education research in India to highlight the need for historically and ethnographically situated research on education and the contributions the papers in the special section make in this regard. Education studies in India are typically oriented towards theoretical debates around provision and social exclusion on the one hand, and applied and evaluation research on the other.[36] While

30. Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 2.
31. Shefali Chandra, *The Sexual Life of English: Languages of Caste and Desire in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); and Sanjay Srivastava, *Constructing Post-Colonial India: National Character and the Doon School* (Delhi: Routledge, 2005).
32. Mary Ann Chacko, 'English Educated as "Ready-Made" Leaders: Re-Inscribing Distinction through the Student Police Cadet Project in Kerala, India', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 4 (Aug. 2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1775356; and Meghan M. Chidsey, 'Theatres of Empowerment: Elite, All-Girls' Indian "Public Schools" and the Production of Performative Altruism', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 4 (Aug. 2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1772544.
33. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 5.
34. Lukose, *Liberalization's Children*, p. 3.
35. Laura Bear, Ritu Birla and Stine Simonsen Puri, 'Speculation: Futures and Capitalism in India', in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 35, no. 3 (2015), pp. 387–91.
36. Geetha B. Nambissan and S. Srinivasa Rao, 'Introduction: Sociology of Education in India—Trajectory, Location, and Concerns', in Geetha B. Nambissan and S. Srinivasa Rao (eds), *Sociology of Education in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1–23.

this body of research is important and necessary, it inadequately attends to the ways in which learners and their families are subjecting themselves to aspirational regimes in the context of liberalisation. By detailing the ways in which educational practices become meaningful to diversely positioned social actors, these papers try to explain what it is about the contemporary historic moment that drives people across incommensurable social differences to invest so deeply and profoundly in education.

Firstly, education studies in India has historically been a practice-oriented discipline that drew primarily from psychological theories to train and certify school teachers.[37] The post-market reform decades have seen a reformulation of this applied orientation as national mandates became tied to international development targets. A 'large quantum of educational research' in the contemporary context is donor driven and evaluative rather than explanatory in nature, 'seeking to understand India's compliance with international goals'.[38] A second strand of education research that aligns with development agendas considers the market rather than the state as the more efficient provider of educational opportunity to not only analyse but also lobby for market-based inclusion of previously-excluded groups.[39] While this uncritical belief in market-led egalitarianism elides the ways in which educational inclusion is mediated by hyper-segmentation or new aspirational regimes, education scholars have largely limited their critiques to the economic rationalisation of educational provision and the entrepreneurial management of resource deprivation.[40]

As A.R. Vasavi and Geetha Nambissan elaborate in their insightful reviews, critical educational studies have examined systemic deficits including inadequate funding, lack of teacher training, poor teaching–learning methods, low academic levels among learners and the overall poor 'quality' of education as well as a range of problems such as class, caste and gender-based exclusions.[41] However, the inclusion/exclusion framework that guides much of this research, inherited from post-colonial socialist aspirations for equality of educational opportunity, is misaligned with the ways in which inclusion and exclusion are intertwined in the context of liberalisation where widening avenues for social mobility co-exist with the intensification of marginalisation.[42] What follows elaborates this entanglement as we introduce the papers in the collection.

37. R. Maithreyi and Vidya Subramanian, 'Mapping the Landscape of Educational Research in India', Concept Note for Workshop on Educational Transformations and Societal Change in Liberalising India, Ahmedabad University, Ahmedabad, 2020.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Nambissan and Ball, 'Advocacy Networks, Choice and Private Schooling of the Poor in India', pp. 324–43; and James Tooley and Pauline Dixon, '"De facto" Privatisation of Education and the Poor: Implications of a Study from Sub-Saharan Africa and India', in *Compare*, Vol. 36, no. 4 (2006), pp. 443–62.
40. Krishna Kumar, 'Quality in Education: Competing Concepts', in *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (2010), pp. 7–18; and Padma M. Sarangapani, 'Notes on Quality in Education', in Manish Jain, Archana Mehendale, Rahul Mukhopadhyay, Padma M. Sarangapani and Christopher Winch (eds), *School Education in India: Market, State and Quality* (Delhi: Routledge India, 2018), pp. 157–76.
41. A.R. Vasavi, *Educational Differentiation and Disjunction* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, forthcoming, 2020); and Geetha B. Nambissan, 'Opening Up the Black Box? Sociologists and the Study of Schooling in India', in Geetha B. Nambissan and S. Srinivasa Rao (eds), *Sociology of Education in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 83–102.
42. For similar attempts to construct frameworks 'beyond inclusion', see Satish Deshpande and Usha Zacharias (eds), *Beyond Inclusion: The Practice of Equal Access in Indian Higher Education* (Delhi: Routledge, 2013).

Regulated emotions, aesthetic bodies, brave critique

Three papers in the special section detail the ephemeral resources non-elites mobilise to pursue impossible futures and how the very impossibility of the task spurs non-elite investment in education. Desai describes how non-elite young women in Delhi mobilise gendered enterprise to dream about prosperous futures.[43] Zyskowski witnesses how young Muslim women from low-income families in Hyderabad orient their bodies and imaginings to the labour market's requirement of Hindu or elite Muslim embodiment.[44] Meanwhile, Babu documents how Dalit Bahujan youth in Bengaluru tenuously attempt brave critique to annihilate caste.[45] The limits of regulated emotions, aesthetic bodies and brave critique are relationally amplified in the next part which examines the material-intensive, spatially-expansive, future work the privileged middle classes undertake to prepare for, and bring to fruition, successful futures. Thus, while education provides a ready site to rehearse desirable futures of all kinds, the material, symbolic and affective resources mobilised for this imaginative work vary.

By describing pedagogic interventions, Desai and Babu explain how aspiration is taught, formally. Desai's paper documents a life skills programme in Delhi which promises the amelioration of poverty through learners' accurate identification and creative deployment of internal resources. Reflective self-awareness, attunement to feelings and attachment to normative, middle-class, respectable futures are explicitly coded into lessons, rehearsed in classes and made into objects of pedagogic value. What empowerment pedagogy attempts is a recalibration of the individual self and its interiority as the pre-eminent resource for social mobility. Unlike caste privilege or land ownership, the self is a universally available resource. The formal teaching of aspiration thus perversely presents desirable middle-class trajectories to non-elite learners without equipping them in the embodiments, disciplinary regimes or resource mobilisations necessary to pursue these. The young women who attend these classes deploy the middle-class entrepreneurial femininities taught to them to negotiate non-elite patriarchal formations, anticipate precarious marriages, and yet hold on to the dream of prosperous futures.

The enormity of work required to imprint non-elite aspirations onto actually-existing, deeply-unequal, material social spaces is revealed in Babu's paper, which documents a personality development workshop undertaken by Dalit Bahujan activists. Interestingly, the performative methods of Dalit Bahujan and non-governmental organisation (NGO) empowerment pedagogy overlap in that both turn inward to produce assertive persons. But the content is radically different and Babu pushes back against too easy a reading of personality workshops as sites for the cultivation of neo-liberal personhood. Rather than individualised emotions, here, the resources mobilised are social histories of oppression and statistical facts about caste privilege. As Babu notes,

43. Karishma Desai, 'Life Skills as Affective Labour: Skilling Girls with Gendered Enterprise', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 4 (Aug. 2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1768479.
44. Kathryn Zyskowski, 'Aspiration as Labour: Muslim Women at a Basic Computer-Training Centre in Hyderabad', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 4 (Aug. 2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1781338.
45. Savitha Suresh Babu, 'Education for Confidence: Political Education for Recasting Bahujan Student Selves', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 4 (Aug. 2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1777692.

the constitutive elements of confidence at the workshop are 'not body language, spoken English, nutrition or other ways of learning to comfortably occupy new urban spaces', but 'a critical refashioning of the Dalit self' through the generation of an alternate 'grammar of worth' that denaturalises caste privilege. The Dalit Bahujan self is replaced in dominant discourses of merit and trained to persistently, assertively and bravely rework the terms of the discourse itself. Here, the personality development programme strives to bear a socially-situated, collectivised, political aspiration. For the young Dalit women attending the workshop who negotiate caste stigma on an everyday basis, the charge to annihilate caste is necessary, enthralling and overwhelming.

Moving tangentially with the more formal trainings described in these two papers, Zyskowski describes how the promises of employment mediated through basic computer skills training draw her informants out from their homes to more actively participate in the IT dreams of middle-class India. Zyskowski witnesses the impossibility of this aspirational location as one of her informants experiments with future selves in a job market that is hostile to Muslim female bodies. Her fantasy futures are played out in the ephemeral space of wedding videos and mobile phone selfies, conjoining the aesthetic labour of imagining commodified forms of thin and professional bodies with the dynamics of aspiration within an IT industry that she will, in all likelihood, never join. The aspirational self continues its strivings in a parallel, representational world. To summarise, the laborious but enticing work of aspiration detailed in these three papers highlights the significance of aspirational practices for self-formation and social belonging at the margins of society. At the same time, the papers explain that the foregrounding of affective resources at the expense of material resources places the burden of bringing forth equitable futures on historically-marginalised groups. In contrast, privileged groups turn to a whole array of material and spatial expansions to retain historically-acquired privileges.

Elite and ethical:[46] 'Exposure' and moral citizenship

If the terrain of aspiration for historically-marginalised groups is the promise of respectable futures achieved through the mobilisation of ephemeral resources, the work of aspiration for the privileged middle classes is resource intensive and spatially expansive. Chidsey and Chacko describe how elite educational projects are predicated on the proliferation of 'extracurricular' activities that compete with academic curricula. Chacko notes that the pedagogy of participatory citizenship in the Student Police Cadet programme in Kerala is constituted by field trips, access to state institutions and people in power, involvement in novel activities like traffic duty and sustained training in physical discipline, and governmental administrative knowledge. Similarly, Chidsey details how historically-elite public schools now facing competition from high-fee-charging private schools recalibrate distinction by teaching moral citizenship through service competitions, projects about social issues, adoption of villages, transnational travel and, most of all, theatrical performances. In addition to exams, there is a now a premium on training bodies and minds to move across diverse social spaces in

46. The title is taken from Manisha Anantharaman, 'Elite and Ethical: The Defensive Distinctions of Middle-Class Bicycling in Bangalore, India', in *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (2017), pp. 864–86.

ways that can efficiently generate value out of experience while also registering moral claims to govern and administer populations.

Ironically, the intensification of material resources in middle-class educational projects is paralleled by the discursive rejection of the material. Whether it is through an evocation of the *samooham* (society), participatory democracy or service opportunities, the focus is redirected away from the materiality of 'exposure' to its allegedly moral agendas. In fact, the Student Police Cadet (SPC) programme examined by Chacko explicitly rejects 'earning' in favour of 'serving'. However, as Chidsey points out, the cost of such service projects tends to be prohibitive. Though the SPC attempts to democratise this new premium on service to all students, Chacko explains how insidious selection processes ensure that those who enter the cadet programme already trained in middle-class English culture are recognised as being better equipped to serve than others. The seduction of the moral is its alleged disregard for the material in a context of heightened commodification, while the challenge of the moral lies in relocating it outside the sphere of benevolence and back in the politics of material and symbolic redistribution.

Engendering aspiration

So far, the variegated social terrain of aspirational pedagogies has been discussed in terms of class, caste and religion. Three papers in the special section provide a window into how aspirational pedagogies are gendered, revealing the changing dynamics of gender and liberalisation. These highlight the shifting dynamics of gender within the lives of elite, public-school female students, girls in urban poor communities in Delhi and young, non-elite women in Muslim communities in Hyderabad.

Chidsey notes the historical importance of high-fee-charging, exclusive public schools for girls in producing elite womanhood along the fault-lines of modernity and tradition, at the intersections of colonial modernity and nationalism. She suggests that in a privatising educational marketplace, such schools enter a more competitive environment as they internationalise their horizons and expand access to a wider set of students. In such a context, the earlier valence of the 'New Indian Woman' that anchored the gendered projects of these schools is newly inflected by an empowerment discourse linked to state-centric and international development discourse, increasingly linked to marketised notions of choice and a more assertive, public womanhood. Chidsey hones in on the ubiquitous performativity of gendered empowerment, enacting a pedagogy of aspiration that manifests itself as a performative altruism of elite womanhood for the plight of her non-elite 'others'—the 'poor, third world girl'. How they enact gendered empowerment while distinguishing themselves from their oppressed, non-elite 'others' generates a gendered discourse of moral citizenship.

Like Chidsey, Desai also contextualises her research at the intersections of national and international gender and development discourses. While Chidsey emphasises a complex and negotiated idea of 'choice' for her elite students, Desai stresses 'enterprise' for her non-elite informants who occupy the subject position of the 'plighted girl child', objects of both national/international development discourse and the performative altruism of the elite students whom Chidsey tracks. As 'enterprise' becomes a

touchstone of gendered empowerment programmes targeting girls in the Global South, the teaching of life skills compels these non-elite girls to perform a particular form of gendered affective labour that aligns with the feminisation of labour and the expansion of the service economy. Furthermore, such skilling orients these girls from urban poor communities towards forms of middle-class femininity based on affective restraint and regulation that the elite students in Chidsey's paper embody. In these ways, in these two papers, we see how liberalisation is transforming gendered aspirations across class/caste lines.

In contrast to forms of gendered *affective* labour that constitute pedagogies of aspiration, Zyskowski's paper draws attention to the gendered *aesthetic* labour that young Muslim women perform in the interstices of aspiring at the edges of India's IT industry. She explores the paradox of these young women's incorporation into computer training classes that will rarely lead to employment, especially given the low rates of women's, and especially Muslim women's, participation in the labour force. The pedagogy of aspiration here is more ephemeral than in Desai's and Chidsey's overtly pedagogic projects. It is an imagining of a gendered selfhood and embodiment through selfies taken on barely accessed mobile phones as it folds into imagining work and lifestyle through the opening up of horizons that basic training in computer literacy affords. This pedagogy of aspiration gets entangled with the ways in which Muslim women's bodies and their fashions find little room to negotiate liberalising India's aspirational economies.

Conclusion: Liberalisation as a pedagogic enterprise

Historians of India remind us time and again that the colonisation of the subcontinent was as much a pedagogic enterprise as it was an economic and political rearrangement of social life.[47] Similarly, the papers in the special section urge us to consider liberalisation in India as a pedagogic enterprise. New economic and political formations require appropriate subjects to produce and inhabit them. The aspirational logics and aesthetic self-fashioning necessary for social belonging in a market economy are taught and learned through everyday lessons in empowerment and enterprise in all sorts of sites. As affective, expressive, aspirational selves emerge across intractable class, gender, caste and religious differences, the papers in this collection show how the diverse subjects of liberalisation are similar but also profoundly different.

Desai's and Chidsey's papers orient us to scale as they describe institutionalised pedagogies of aspiration unfolding at the intersections of national and international gender and development discourses. When read together, the empowerment lessons of elite public-school girls and plighted girl children in the Global South alert us to an emerging spectrum of difference. Elite young women anticipate opportunities to serve 'other' women as a form of leadership and capital accumulation, while orienting themselves to respectable married lives. Meanwhile the 'others', young girls in *bastis* (slums) in Delhi, cautiously anticipate precarious marriages and opportunities for paid work even as they dream of prosperous futures. Both papers show how the aspirations of women are

47. Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

regulated. But the spaces, situations and negotiations through which regulated aspirations are learned, and the futures to which they are oriented, vary.

Meanwhile, Babu's paper on Dalit Bahujan reworking of confidence from individualised participation in competitive labour markets to a socially situated critique of caste privilege questions easy readings of empowerment projects as sites of neo-liberal subject formation. The reworking of the socially situated self has profound political implications. This proliferation of politics in educational spaces is perhaps most visible in India today in its public universities. A less easily recognisable affective and aesthetic terrain of gendered politics and discriminatory markets is seen in Zyskowski's paper, which gives us an intimate view of how aspiration is experienced and lived out in technologically mediated margins. Lastly, Chacko's paper concludes the special section by foregrounding the implications of aspiration for democratic citizenship and social justice. She points out that everybody is now invited to participate, but that participation for democratic justice unfolds in and through efficient participation in competitive markets. Ultimately, to understand the massive and intensive expansion of educational projects in post-liberalisation India, we need to pay attention to the everyday experiences and stakes of fashioning aspirational selves in educational contexts in liberalising India.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.