SANJAY SRIVASTAVA
SOAS University of London

Relational flexibility:

Skills, "personality development," and the limits of theorizing neoliberal selfhood in India

ABSTRACT
Since the 1990s, training programs for service-sector jobs have proliferated in India. Frequently referred to as "skills training," these programs aim to overcome the perceived cultural and professional "deficiencies" of youth from the poorest sections of society. They focus on "soft skills" and "personality development," teaching body etiquette, time discipline, and emotional control; introducing students to "global" cuisine and commodities; and developing English-language skills. How do the students in these programs make sense of attempts to train them in new dispositions? An ethnography of Indian skills training finds that capitalism's most marginal subjects creatively engage with its possibilities, in ways unaccounted for in arguments about the making of "neoliberal subjectivity." For contexts like this—in which neoliberal processes may not necessarily produce neoliberal subjects—a more productive account is found in anthropological writings on split and partitioned selves as deliberate acts of self-making. Among Indian skills trainees, this may be conceptualized as "relational flexibility." [*skilling, soft skills, personality development, youth, selfhood, neoliberalism, work, India*]

In a half-constructed building on the outskirts of the small town of Chandwa, in India's eastern state of Jharkhand, a teacher leads a class called "Direct and Door-to-Door Selling." The course, sponsored by the Ministry of Rural Development, is part of the central government's ambitious "Skill India" program, launched in 2015. Also known as Roshni (Hindi and Urdu: Bright, Light), the program targets youth in 24 officially designated "Left Wing Extremist Affected Districts" (LWEADs) across the country. Jharkhand is home to a violent and long-running Maoist movement (Shah 2006), and Chandwa is located in the administrative district of Latehar, one of the most significantly affected areas.

The teacher talks about the importance of "attitude," "etiquette," "positivity," "time management," and "looking professional." He plays an American video clip from YouTube in which a man in a suit discusses "ideal" selling techniques. The students are primarily from one of Jharkhand's several *adivasi* (indigenous) communities. Their families mainly practice landless farming and forest gathering. For many, this is their first trip out of remote rural environments. The class stares blankly at the screen and then at the teacher. "Is there anything in the video you did not understand?" he asks. "No, sir, we've understood everything," the students respond as one. They are keen to continue with the lesson.

The Skill India program is part of a history of concerns—stretching over almost a century—that Indians lack the "proper" skills and dispositions for "modern" work. During the colonial period, a strong body of British opinion held that it was difficult to educate a colonized population in the ways of Western modernity and work habits (Chatterjee 1993). Others, such as the founders of the elite Doon School (established in 1935), sought to address this "problem" by establishing English-style boarding schools

(Srivastava 1998). For the leaders of the colonial industrial system, a key task was to transform "unskilled coolies" into "skilled machine-men" (A. Kumar 2018, 267). British colonials often pointed to a lack of proper education, particularly with regard to Indian children from poor backgrounds. "Their primary education is that of the streets," noted John Mackenzie, principal of the prestigious Wilson College in Bombay (now Mumbai). "They get from it a certain superficial sharpness, but little knowledge that is to be of service in the business of life and less than no discipline" (Chandavarkar 1994, 170).

During the postcolonial period, even as the state set about establishing industrial training institutes and polytechnics, educationists fretted over whether the parents' "mentality" would still handicap their children's capacity for modern work (Parry 2020, 485). Further, it became widely accepted that a decrepit educational system mainly produced "incomplete" and "provincial" citizens (N. Kumar 2006), ill equipped for new economic opportunities. These concerns have sharpened since the early 1990s, when the Indian government implemented economic liberalization policies (Sengupta 2008). The task of producing "suitable" workers for jobs in a changed economic environment has become a key aspect of public policy and popular discussions in India.

The postliberalization period has seen an expansion of training schemes for those *cultural* and *social* skills that, according to education and skills experts, are lacking among those who seek employment in the "service" sectors—such as retail and the hospitality industries. Key among these are so-called *soft skills*—a loosely but widely used term that refers to a wide range of "cultural" attributes, including deportment, body etiquette, tonality, speech, and English-language ability. These are imagined as essential to a variety of service professions and to improving employment opportunities in public-facing occupations. Many Indian workers suffer from "deficits" in soft skills, according to a variety of experts (KPMG Advisory Services 2018, 68), who stress the need for workers with "cosmopolitan worldliness" (Rofel 2007, 3) to deal with a "more demanding consumer" (KPMG Advisory Services 2018, 68). Soft skills training is also linked to *personality development*, a term used imprecisely to suggest that such skills can fundamentally transform ways of being.

The impetus for this research derives from a series of conversations with Hira Singh, a gardener employed at a research institute I worked at in Delhi, and his 17-year-old son, Rajesh.[1] The family lived in a nearby slum. Hira Singh often told me about a "private coaching center" his son was attending. "The fees are exorbitant," he once said, "but government schools can't teach what is required for a job like yours. I want Rajesh to learn manners, discipline, and other new things. Otherwise, he will end up with a job like mine." On some days, Rajesh would be sent to my office for advice on "proper behavior" or to glean other information that might further his life chances.

Both father and son complained about the poor quality of public education—a familiar concern (LaDousa 2014)—and worried that Rajesh's school offered him little prospect of escaping the cycle of poverty that many families like theirs experienced. Yet they also expressed great enthusiasm for the "personality development course" (using the English term) at the privately run institute. "Personality development," Rajesh noted, "is all about *jazba* [Hindi and Urdu: feeling, spirit] and confidence. No matter how educated, you feel illiterate without it. It is also about knowledge of society." Our conversations were frequently marked by such sentiments of desperation, anxiety, and hope.

In the non-Western world a very large cross section of society imagines that "economic liberalization" and incorporation into global economic processes offer new opportunities for the future. In this context, there exists a complex set of relationships among identity, youth cultures, educational regimes, and aspirations for social mobility, as registered in a significant body of scholarship (Appadurai 2004; Farrugia 2018; Fernandes 2006; Guha 2009; Jeffrey 2010; Lim Chua 2014; Lukose 2010; Mains 2007; Upadhya 2016). This future-as-opportunity perspective is, however, shadowed by anxieties linked to "soaring aspiration and drowning disappointment in a time of deep uncertainty" (Lim Chua 2014, 2). This is particularly true of young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who cannot access well-functioning private and state institutions. Primary and secondary schools cannot offer "the 'legally guaranteed value' of an education sanctioned by the state" (LaDousa 2014, 11) and, thereby, avenues for social and material advancement. At the heart of soft-skills programs, then, are widespread perceptions that the education system is deficient and this results in "personality shortcomings" among workers facing new economic opportunities.

Further, there is convergence of opinion between the state and the private sector regarding the importance of soft-skills and personality development. Many training programs are collaborations between the two, indicating how the state, "reconceptualised" (Gooptu 2013) through intimate relationships with private capital in the postliberalization period, imagines national and individual futures. To understand training practices that involve soft skills and personality development, I use three ethnographic contexts. These are (1) a Skills Development Centre (SDC) in the town of Dausa near Jaipur (Rajasthan), sponsored by the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD); (2) another MoRD-run SDC in Ranchi (Jharkhand state), which functions under the aegis of the Roshni program, specifically designed for "extremist affected" areas; and (3) a private personality development training institute that I will refer to as Westwinn. Fieldwork at the three sites was carried out from 2016

to 2018. The language used was Hindi, sometimes mixed with English.

The students attending the three programs have quite different backgrounds, and the sites are chosen to illustrate how different aspects of subalternity—caste, region, and gender—influence how trainees position themselves as active participants in self-making, rather than passive subjects being acted on. This is an alternative to arguments regarding the "commodification" of the self under conditions of contemporary capitalism. An anthropological approach is particularly well equipped to explore the "contextual *embeddedness* of neoliberal restructuring projects" (Brenner and Theodore 2003, 4; italics in the original) through focusing on conditions of life under *regionally specific* regimes of capital. The forms of selfhood experienced by workers whose livelihoods involve "affective labor" are inadequately captured through "the easy dichotomies about commodified versus authentic relationships" (Mankekar and Gupta 2016, 39). Such dichotomies exclude an understanding of how young people from subaltern backgrounds draw on "a range of norms about virtuous comportment, kinship obligations, entrepreneurial practice … [as well as] their own critical imaginings of the future" (Qermezi Huang 2017, 109).

Building on ethnographic vignettes that explore how young people position new demands for using affect, emotions, and bodily dispositions *within* older norms of behavior and constraint, this article contributes to debates about the effects of "neoliberalism" on contemporary selves in India. This term has come to be applied across several social, political, and economic contexts, achieving near universal status as explanatory variable and critique (Flew 2014); it also serves "as a generic gloss for contemporary capitalism" (Freeman 2014, 18). Yet the consensus regarding its impact, meaning, and trajectory and the "too-easy application of models of capitalism and neoliberalism … obscure the variety of local experience" (Mains 2007, 660); "an examination of local values" can "demonstrate both the value and the limits of analyses of neoliberalism" (660).

Work, emotional labor, and neoliberalism

An important backdrop to my discussion is Hochschild's (1983) pioneering study of "emotional labor," *The Managed Heart*. The book provides a comprehensive and empirically rich guide to the languages of labor, economics, and financial management and the social and cultural worlds they seek to efface. The ethnographic contexts I draw on allow for an analysis of the new worlds of work that, in the Indian context, focus on the "transmutation of an emotional system" (Hochschild 1983, 19). This refers to the public uses and standardization of emotional life, which becomes a work requirement in service industries. "Emotional labor" remains a powerful concept for describing types of work

that require one to consistently deploy a pleasant and caring demeanor in dealing with customers. It differs from, say, the demands made of an assembly-line worker, since for the latter, maintaining a "pleasant" exterior is not part of the job description; emotional labor is accompanied by physical labor but requires that physical exertions not translate into an exhausted and self-pitying countenance.

Hochschild's contribution has been followed by a growing body of writings that address the fashioning of new selves under contemporary regimes of work in both Western and non-Western contexts (du Gay 1996; see also Aneesh 2006; Gershon 2011; Mankekar and Gupta 2016; Maitra and Maitra 2018; Park and Abelmann 2004; Urciuoli 2008). I focus on two significant themes within this corpus. First, Hochschild (1983, 22) notes that a reaction to the "transmutation" of emotional life is that "we are witnessing a call for the conservation of 'inner resources,' a call to save another wilderness from corporate use and keep it 'forever wild.'" Workers in service sectors, she suggests, divide their selves into "real" and "onstage" ones as a way of avoiding stress (156). But this reaction to the "commercialization of feeling," she adds, "also poses serious problems. For in dividing up our sense of self, in order to save the 'real' self from unwelcome intrusions, we necessarily relinquish a healthy sense of wholeness" (183). The making of the service-sector self is posited as a particular kind of alienation in which "a private emotional system has been subordinated to commercial logic" (185); service-sector capitalism produces the split self, and the worker becomes estranged from her real feelings.

Second, more recent studies on new selves speak more directly of the work cultures of "neoliberalism," a term not much in popular use when Hochschild's book was published (Flew 2014; Harvey 2005; Mudge 2008; Ong 2006). This work culture has been characterized as self-driven entrepreneurialism. In line with global discourses, "the logic of neoliberal governmentality" in India, Gooptu (2013, 8) notes, is played out through the demands for producing "responsible, self-regulating, autonomous individuals to govern themselves in the context of a reconceptualized state project"; the vignette with which this article opened refers to a public-private collaboration in this direction. "Neoliberalization, thus," Gooptu suggests, "depends on the development of self-regulation, self-direction, and self-management of enterprising selves" (8). Further, "the values of enterprise culture, which include individual initiative, risk-taking, and being entrepreneurial …, lie at the core of India's skill-development programmes and drive its implementation" (Nambiar 2013, 57). At the heart of "the logic of neoliberal governmentality" is, then, the aim of producing the "*ideal* neoliberal worker" (Urciuoli 2008, 219; italics added), a task conducted "at the level of public culture and everyday practice through a range of state and non-state actors" (Gooptu 2013, 8).

In the ethnographic material I present here, I engage with both these perspectives to think about what is peculiar about Indian circumstances. Is emotional labor accompanied by a search for a "real" self that is being suppressed? What is the *empirical* nature of the "enterprising" and "self-regulating" self that neoliberal processes seek to produce? What is the *active* relationship between the state and private capital, on the one hand, and contemporary subaltern subjects on the other—subjects who are often represented by scholarly and popular literature as "acted on" to become "neoliberal" workers? That is, beyond using it as "an all-purpose denunciatory category" (Flew 2014, 51), how can a focus on "the *lived* experience of neoliberalization" (Gooptu 2013, 6; italics added) allow researchers to understand how socially and economically marginalized populations learn to live within structures that constrain in order to seek a way out of them?

Inadequate citizens

If many contemporary Indians are anxious that young workers lack appropriate skills, this can be linked to ideas about the "demographic dividend," which is imagined as accruing to "developing" countries (Mehrotra, Gandhi, and Kamaladevi 2015). The "dividend" refers to a scenario in which "the vast majority of the Indian population will be of working age" (Deuchar 2014, 144). Its benefits, however, are seen to be at risk owing to the inadequate education system and lack of appropriate skills (Maitra and Maitra 2018). This, as a report by the Confederation of Indian Industry puts it, leads to a population of "youth who are not fit to be absorbed by the market" (CII 2014, 19). Providing skills for gainful employment is a crucial aspect of the Indian government's plan to equip disadvantaged groups for economic and social mobility. To this end, the government in 2014 created the Ministry for Skills Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE). The Skill India program launched by Prime Minister Modi in 2015 aims to train 402 million people by 2022, and the 2015 budget allocated 5,040 crore rupees (about US$627 million) for skills development. In 2016 the prime minister's Kaushal Vikas Yojana (Youth Development Scheme) set aside another 12,000 crore rupees (about US$1.5 billion) for the same purpose (*Economic Times* 2015; Iyer 2015; *Times of India* 2016).

The formalization of the "skills push" to augment youth capacities can be traced to the 11th Five Year Plan (2007–12) and programs begun under earlier governments that have intensified under the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Mehrotra, Gandhi, and Kamaladevi 2015; Nambiar 2013). A variety of small and large corporations have been contracted by the government to establish residential SDCs. The companies, known as Project Implementation Agencies (PIAs), provide training across different "domains" such as "Hospitality," "Customer Retail Service," and "Domestic BPO" (business process outsourcing). The Indian skills development program is not unique and is dwarfed by the Chinese one (Mehrotra, Gandhi, and Kamaladevi 2015, 63; see also Hansen and Woronov 2013). One major difference, however, is that Indian efforts pay much greater attention to "soft skills," whereas Chinese schemes focus on technical education (Mehrotra, Gandhi, and Kamaladevi 2015). In policy circles, comparisons with China are common, and the Indian system is frequently found wanting. Compared to China, a government-appointed committee reported, Indian skills programs are marked by "confusion and mess," making it difficult to make India the "skills capital of the world" (Sharda Committee 2016, vi).

The "messiness" that the report complains of refers not only to shortcoming of the formal soft-skills ecosystem, but also to the vast, unregulated but extremely popular network of private providers that exists alongside it; Rajesh, the gardener's son, attended one of these. The most significant precursor to this alternative landscape of skills development is the well-known Rapidex English Speaking course, first published as a book by Delhi's Pustak Mahal publishing house in 1976 and institutionalized in public memory in advertisements featuring cricketer Kapil Dev.[2] Rapidex publications contain instructions on *both* language as well as demeanor. The story of Rapidex and Kapil Dev concerns the possibilities of rapid transformation of the "provincial" *male* self into a metropolitan being (N. Kumar 2006; LaDousa 2014). The Rapidex "model" has spawned training institutes and "coaching" centers where "young people in PDE [personality development and enhancement] programmes strive to learn to effortlessly perform the practices that constitute and communicate an enterprising, cosmopolitan, professional self" (McGuire 2013, 122).

In the decades since Rapidex was launched, the provincial *female* body has also become a significant object of transformation. Coaching centers have proliferated around the country, ranging from hole-in-the-wall outfits in small towns that target the urban and rural poor to well-appointed franchises in metropolitan cities that offer airline cabin-crew training to those of greater means. What they share are self-established norms regarding the "personality types" required for success in the service sector and syllabuses drawn from an admixture of management theory, popular psychology, fashion dictates, and dietary prescriptions.

Attempts to refashion Indian selves have complex histories, and the "subjective and affective dimensions of skills" (Gooptu and Chakravarty 2018, 295) are significant to this project. The dominant analytical tendency is to imagine programs aimed at "personality development"—to meet market demands for "suitable" workers—as unhindered projects of transformation that produce "neoliberal" subjects. This derives from broader global frameworks within which studies of soft-skills training and its effects

focus on "alienation"—how an "authentic" self is violated through accretions of fake or surface identities (Hochschild 1983; Urciuoli 2008). By reconsidering the idea of the neoliberal subject as an empirical fact and the focus on authenticity as identity, I show that soft-skills trainees in India use training in affect and dispositions to *negotiate* new identities that are neither "neoliberal" nor its antithesis. Studying the social terrain on which soft-skills training unfolds allows us to understand subaltern self-making, which tends to be effaced in arguments couched as critiques of neoliberal strategies.[3]

Vignette 1: "Good but Gujar," or the meaning of caste in a time of shopping malls

The town of Dausa, about 70 kilometers east of Jaipur, is home to an SDC under the aegis of the MoRD. It is funded under the ministry's Rural Skills Scheme. As of March 2020, it claims to have trained more than 1 million rural youth (MoRD, n.d.). The SDC has been contracted to one of India's largest retailing companies, MG. It offers a handful of short courses: Retail Operation, Salesperson (Retail), Domestic Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), and Hospitality Assistant.

Dinesh Chauhan, the executive in charge of the MG's skills development unit, earlier worked for the Indian corporate giant Reliance Industries Limited (RIL). He is based at the company's head office in Gurugram (formerly known as Gurgaon), the privately developed new township in the state of Haryana, on the southern borders of Delhi (Srivastava 2015). His unit is a joint venture between MG and the National Skills Development Corporation, a public-private partnership. Chauhan is assisted by Arnab Dutta, who moved to MG after working for an American company called Landmark Worldwide. Landmark, according to its information booklet, is an "international personal and professional growth, training and development company." In one of Landmark's information sessions I attended, the audience was told that its programs work through "Breakthrough Technology," which consists of learning to recognize the difference between "change" and "transformation." The former, as a Landmark representative put it, "is past-based. […] Transformation, on the other hand, is an act of bringing forth or inventing. This dramatic shift [in understanding] enables us to think and act outside existing views and limits and to redefine ourselves and the reality we have known." Chauhan mentioned that Dutta's background was important because the most significant aspect of the training in Dausa is to "first change the mindsets of the rural young men who enroll at the SDC."

A constant problem has been high dropout rates—of up to 70 percent—in both the training programmes as well as jobs (NIRD 2016, 1). To address this, Chauhan frequently invited "experts" to submit proposals for training and evaluation of students at its SDCs. The attendees at one such consultation included a management professor; representatives of Braintree Solutions, a "social psychology firm [that deals] with behavioural measurements"; the CEO of the company Character Development Initiative; and two members of the Art of Living (AoL) spirituality-based organization.[4] Chauhan strongly believes that AoL can provide the important "emotional training" to village youth to develop the "mindset" that is required for the modern workplace. The attendees were asked to make suggestions for ensuring that all trainees complete the course and continue in their employment.

Soon after the meeting at MG's premises in Gurugram, Braintree submitted a proposal for a program to "screen" potential trainees after they come to a village "mobilization" fair. It consisted of the following steps: (1) Level 1 screening: a behavioral checklist; Level 2 screening: work value and motivation inventory (WVMI); Level 3: employability skill index (ESI); behavioral interview; and final enrollment.

The first batch of 80 students at the Dausa SDC began their course in September 2014. There are classes on customer relations in which students are instructed on the importance of smiling; product categories ("What is the difference between Fair and Lovely and Fair and Handsome skin-whitening cream?" the teacher asks); and methods of selling (*prachar-prasar* [advertising]; *dhyan akarshit karna* [attracting attention]; *vikalpon ka chunao* [choosing products]; *kharid ka nirnay* [the decision to buy]). In the hospitality classes, students learn about different departments in a hotel, such as the front office and "F and B" (food and beverages) and equipment, such as "minibars." There is also a class on "time management," in which students are told to draw up a list of "the 10 most important to-do things." The teacher draws a "time matrix" consisting of two rows, two columns, and four different headings.

Between Braintree's four-step evaluation system, Art of Living's emotional training, and various "time management" techniques, the stage does indeed seem set for the institutionalization of an "enterprise culture" through alignments between the state, the private sector, and marketized spiritual economies. It has the makings of an ambitious and significantly funded project of transformation of body and mind to produce new labor.

But for Abhishek Kumar, the head of the Dausa Center, there are some additional concerns. "This entire region," he tells me, "has a large population of Gujar and Meena criminal castes." He adds that he is "unwilling to take in Gujar and Meena trainees, as their mentality is different," and because "employers are also not willing to employ Gujars and Meenas." So, he continues, "I said to potential employers, 'Don't take them on the payroll. Take them on contract.'" Naming one of India's largest retailers, he says the company is unwilling to employ Gujar and Meena boys because it thinks they are "notorious." Also, "Meena boys come only

to learn computers and get free food […] as what they really want is to apply for government jobs." An information pamphlet for the training begins, "The government wants to give you a job." The training is, however, for private sector positions. Sunil Meena, a trainee, asks me, "Why can't private jobs be made into government jobs?" He adds, using the English word *personality*, "A government job has personality and respect."

Gujars and Meenas are "Denotified Tribes." That is, their names have been taken off the list of "Criminal Castes and Tribes" promulgated during the colonial era. The colonial discourse on Criminal Tribes was built on European debates over "criminal classes" and whether they could be "rehabilitated" into dutiful citizens (Radhakrishna 2001). Building on "the notion of dangerous classes" (Nigam 1990, 158) prevalent in Victorian England, the colonial state identified certain Indian populations where "crime as a profession passed on from one generation of criminal caste to another" (Radhakrishna 2001, 5). Till its annulment in 1949, the regulation of "criminal castes" derived from the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. But ideas of "hereditary" criminality continue to have popular currency. Rahul, another employee at the Dausa Center, described the Gujar "character" in the following terms:

> Gujars live in groups, and they are not afraid of fighting. […] They are a martial race.[5] […] You must know how to be "emotional" with them […] [talk to them] about *desh bhakti* [patriotism] […] They are only scared of their *panch-patels* [village heads]. Their first choice is the army […] If you fight with them, the entire group will end up at your doorstep. […] The Art of Living classes will change their attitudes. I also think that we should take Gujars after the age of 25. […] After that age, their boiling blood subsides.

Ghanshyam Gujar, 22, is a student in the Hospitality course. He tells me about the "problem" with Gujars such as their lack of "self-discipline" and their "speaking problem." "That is why we don't do well at interviews," he says. The government should "open a center everywhere to improve us Gujars," he says, continuing, "My father said, 'Enroll in this course so that you can get a certificate. It will come in use later […] when applying for a government job.'"

Many students drop out from training courses because they realize that the training does not lead to a government job. Trainees such as Ghanshyam Gujar—subjected to popular discourses about the "problems" of "hereditary criminality" and recidivism—were convinced of their own "shortcomings" and that these could be overcome only through the power and prestige of a government job. Defects in personality, he thought, required a "retraining" in manners, affects, and emotions. The trainees were keen participants in the Art of Living classes, which became part of the curriculum. In one of my last conversations at the

Dausa Centre, Ghanshyam Gujar reflected on his apparent predicament:

> Some weeks ago, one of my friends from this center was interviewed by this big retail chain. His interview went very well, but he did not get the job. His evaluation form had come back with the comment "Good but Gujar." Character behavior, talent […] he had it all but was rejected. … One boy did not add Gujar to his name and was selected. But he was later rejected when they found out.

Vignette 2: Terrorists, friends, and mall workers

I am on my way from Jharkhand's capital city of Ranchi to the town of Chandwa in Latehar District to meet Ramesh Ganju, a trainee from an SDC run by TAG, a project implementation agency. Ramesh lives in the village of Loharsi, about 20 kilometers from Chandwa, and worked for a few months with Eureka Forbes, a company that makes water purifiers for middle-class homes. I am accompanied by Harish, a TAG employee. As we drive toward Chandwa, Harish repeats several times that we must leave for Ranchi no later than 4 p.m. because Latehar is a "badly affected area" and the roads are unsafe after then. A variety of "Maoist" groups hold sway over Latehar and the surrounding districts. I have been following the Roshni training programs that have been funded by the Ministry of Rural Development to "mobilize," train, and find jobs for young people from LWEADs (Left Wing Extremism Affected Districts). In many cases, "mobilizers" employed by the agencies walk through dense jungles to reach villages and tell potential trainees about schemes for mall workers and salespeople for Eureka Forbes. "If you don't train them for proper jobs," a Jharkhand government official tells me, "they will turn to anti-state activities." From 2015 to 2017, the Roshni scheme aimed to train 50,000 young people from "below poverty level" backgrounds. A special focus of the scheme is what it identifies as "PTGs," or primitive tribal groups.

As we drive, the countryside out of Ranchi is bone-dry. It is dotted with tiny, parched fields and mud houses with thatched or mud-tile roofs. Occasionally, the two-lane highway passes through thick green forests of sal and mahua trees and blooming flowers of palash (flame of the forest). We drive past women sitting next to piles of firewood for sale. We also pass brightly colored single-room buildings that display signboards reading Stenford School and Oxbridge International School, unaccredited businesses offering promises of another world in a landscape of deprivation and violence. The traffic includes motorcycles with up to five passengers and buses with men precariously perched on the roof, appropriate indications of the area's haphazard and inadequate transport options. About 10 kilometers from Chandwa, as we descend into a valley, there is an outpost of the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force. It is

guarded by soldiers with machine guns and is one of several signs of the long-running violent conflict between the state and Maoist insurgents.

We arrive in Chandwa around 11:30 a.m. and wait to meet Gautam Oraon, TAG's local mobilizer. Our car is parked near the Chandwa police station. A large signboard displays details about "rehabilitation" facilities for "terrorists." After about 20 minutes, Gautam Oraon arrives on a motorcycle and leads us on to a road off the highway, and we head toward Loharsi. TAG trainees invariably describe themselves as being from "Chandwa thana" (police station) rather than from their village; given the constancy of violence, both by the state and Maoists, the police station is a logical point of reference.

The two-lane bitumen road to Loharsi is in surprisingly good condition. It came as part of a privately constructed coal-fired power plant. But the plant, Harish says, is not operational because there was a "dispute" regarding payment of a "levy" to the "party" (i.e., a local Maoist group). As we drive toward the village, ours is the only car on the road, and the silence around us is heightened by the heat. Harish echoes an earlier refrain: "We must leave this place by 4 p.m. It is not at all safe after that."

We arrive in Loharsi at 12:30 p.m. and alight near a whitewashed house. We are told that many of the villagers are attending a *van adhikar* (forest rights) meeting in the building, organized by "the party." Our group hastily move away, walking toward Ramesh Ganju's house. His father greets us, and we are seated in a narrow passageway. There is a strong hot wind that blows through the passageway, turning it into an open oven. The electricity has been gone for several hours.

I had first met Ramesh in a "life skills" class at TAG's Ranchi-based SDC. "We must learn the importance of a positive attitude," says the young woman leading the class. The students are asked to fill in the blanks in the following sentence: "Success follows those who are ___ in all situations." "What are the do's of positive relationships and attitudes?" she continues. "Focus on work, take on challenges, plan ahead, and take care of *yourself,*" she says. "Today," she adds, "we will discuss self-evaluation. Do you know the Hindi word for 'self-evaluation'?" The class is unable to answer. "Self-evaluation," she carries on in Hindi, "means to test oneself, write something about oneself […] like a short story […] and evaluate oneself—*mulyankan.* […] You must be self-aware to carry out self-evaluation."

Self-awareness is also an important part of training as a CSA (customer sales agent). In classrooms made to look like shopfloors, students learn about body language, discipline, "attitude," and "etiquette." The key to learning is through role play: the new self must *indicate* its subjectivity rather than merely reflect on it. Students engage in many rounds of role-playing and are judged on demeanor as well as how they align inner and outer states of being. "Do you know

the meaning of 'empathy'?" a teacher asks. "There are three states of empathy," she says, "listening, suggesting, and inquiring." She also asks if they know what "emotional bonding" means. She talks about "interpersonal skills," which, she says, "consist of empathy and emotional bonding […] in order to connect with strangers … the customer." There is a "student declaration form" to be signed by trainees. It speaks of the "opportunity presentation" that they attended to learn about their study schedule.

As a context in which people forge new relationships with the world, commodity cultures form a significant aspect of many of the classes. In the Hospitality Management class, there is a mock restaurant where students are taught to recognize the difference between brown and white bread and learn the correct procedures for silver service. Discussions regarding "choco-flakes" and "wheat flakes" and "scrambled eggs" fill a great deal of classroom time. Most students come from backgrounds similar to Ramesh's. His father is a landless laborer.

Ramesh is quite animated when I ask him about his classroom experiences. "After those classes," he tells me, "I have learnt body language—behavior, eye contact, how to stand […] And I have learnt to spot 'brands.'" "Also," he adds, "earlier, I would tremble with fear when speaking to a government officer visiting my village […] that fear is gone. I am a different person now." Unprompted, he continues, "But you know, my parents are like gods, and even though after the training I will be a different person, my relationship with them will not change." The conversation about parents and the centrality of the family repeats itself with many others. This sentiment sits *alongside* the intent of the training to reposition students in worlds beyond the family, locality, and region. I ask Ramesh about the abuse he might face during his house-to-house calls to sell water purifiers. "Actually," he responds, "controlling my emotions is not difficult … and if we use soft skills, no matter how angry the customer might be, he becomes *shaant* [peaceful]." Our conversation continues as follows:

> Sanjay Srivastava. Do you ever feel under pressure or harassed? The work seems very difficult.
>
> Ramesh Ganju. Not at all. There might be one or two calls that might trouble us […] but if the company is giving you so much money … then you have to take some "pressure." […] I have never lived outside the village […] and now I am getting to learn a lot from customers. […] To get a government job, you need knowledge in every sphere, but I don't have it. The schools here hardly function, the teachers are usually absent, and we can't afford the latest books. However, I am [now] gathering that knowledge through the training […] government jobs are about "settlement" [permanence], aren't they? Earlier I was very hesitant and had very low "confidence

level" […] now my "confidence level" is very high. […] I smile all the time […] and have learnt to learn from customers.

Many of the SDC classes end with a game. Ramesh tells me that the one he remembers best is called "Spot the Terrorist," which followed the door-to-door selling class. If the "terrorist winks at you," he says, "you are dead […] so everyone must combine to spot the terrorist."

Vignette 3: Mary Masih from Delhi's Kailashpuri

This section is about young women from villages, small towns and poorer localities of large cities who enroll in personality development classes to learn new bodily and oral skills at the privately owned Westwinn, India's most famous "air-hostess training institute." The company was founded in 1993 and began by conducting weeklong programs on speaking English and on personality development. It now offers four different types of diplomas in aviation, hospitality, and travel management. The personality curriculum is based on an eclectic mix of management theories, dietary prescriptions, naturopathy, bodily techniques, self-help discourses, and frameworks drawn from "global psychology." Westwinn's programs have affiliations with the British Higher National Certificate in Hospitality, Travel and Management; Edexcel (a Pearson company for evaluations and testing); and English Edge, an Indian language-training company. Though all female trainees want jobs in the aviation industry, most find employment at hotel front desks and, sometimes, as "hostesses" at private parties thrown by Delhi's rich.

Twenty-year-old Mary Masih was one of the first students I met at Westwinn. Mary lives in Kailashpuri in West Delhi, where her father owns a small sari shop. Mr. Masih grew up on the campus of Delhi University's elite St. Stephen's College, where his uncle—from the socioeconomically marginalized Dalit, or "lower-caste" Christian community—worked as a gardener and was provided accommodation. He initially moved to the Mongolpuri area in northeast Delhi and then to Kailashpuri. Both these localities had earlier been "unauthorized colonies," that is, not officially designated as residential areas but "illegally" occupied by the urban poor in the hope that they might eventually become "authorized." To start with, Mary's parents opposed her joining Westwinn. But as her mother put it, "We never got the chance to do these things, and we are glad that she is doing it." Mindful of a socially conservative milieu, Mary would leave home wearing a traditional *salwar-kameez* and, after reaching Westwinn, change into the tight top and miniskirt outfit she was required to wear for training. She was forbidden to wear makeup at home. This, her parents said, might attract "negative" comments from neighbors and members of the extended family.

When I first met Mary, she was part of a class that was practicing the tongue twister "Betty Botter bought some butter." One by one, all the students stood in front of the class and tried reciting the verse, invariably failing to complete it. The recitation is part of transforming the provincial female self into a metropolitan, cosmopolitan one. It involves training in the English language and enunciation; learning techniques in skin care and hair styling; performing deference and temporal discipline; developing a knowledge of commodities; and retraining one's gait, gestures, and, significantly, emotions.

"Betty Botter" is also part of the project of effacing "mother tongue influence," or MTI. The Punjabis, one teacher told me, have the least problem with MTI, and those from the economically backward state of Bihar, the greatest. "The Biharis are the hardest working," he went on to say, "and the most intelligent, but their MTI problem is the most acute." A significant part of retraining the self to present as another is through unrelenting retraining of the body; the body is a language. As the same teacher told his class, "English requires more jaw movements as compared to Hindi." He proceeded to demonstrate three types of jaw movements. All students took turns to copy the movements, the body still and the face contorting in different directions. "You must soften your voices," another teacher says, "soften R, T, D […] English is a very soft language. … Intonation is very important, adopt a soft tone … the sharpness has to go away." Language, emotions, and the body are linked, and effacing MTI involves other kinds of corporeal training, including a complete overhaul of oral techniques. Students are taught to reduce "words per minute," to "moderate volume," and to alter pitch. And, of course, more jaw movements. The body must be trained to enter the service industry through biomechanical methods: "Pace! Pitch! Power! Pause!" the teacher calls out.

The acquisition of service-sector cosmopolitanism is also the context of a dialogue about the relationship between surfaces and depths: there is *deep* immersion in surface behavior and attempts to "appropriately" retrain the senses. Teachers repeatedly stress that being "less emotional" is key to a successful career in a new global economy. During sessions in which students are asked to list personal characteristics they would like to improve on, they most frequently speak of "my emotional nature." Westwinn utilizes different ways to train the body into "rationality," including reprimands for listing "listening to sad songs" as a hobby. Older and "disruptive" ways of being—MTI, for example—are to be brought into line with newly acquired dispositions. The body must move in tandem with new expressive possibilities.

Speaking of her training, Mary Masih mentioned that it had made her "more confident" as she had learned "to control her emotions and discuss things in a rational manner." Teachers at Westwinn thought there was a specific

relationship between gender, emotions, and confidence. According to them, it explained why young women were keener students. As one teacher put it,

> The time period that a girl has for picking up new skills is very small—because of concerns about marriage—so she wants to learn as much as possible, and as quickly as possible. […] For this, girls must overcome emotional attitudes so that the limited time they have can be devoted to learning.

On the other hand, however, the confident and rational female-self relationship is dogged by an anxiety. As Mary was to note,

> When we get married, we will be able to introduce ideas of personality development into our families. However, there is a difference between "confidence" and "overconfidence." Overconfidence turns into *aham* [pride] … and we must learn to strike a balance.

Mary was selected for employment as cabin crew, and we last met on a flight from Mumbai to Delhi. She has come a long way from her home in the formerly illegal shantytowns of Mongolpuri and Kailashpuri. But it is difficult to say where she is going. She says her parents will soon look for a groom for her, but, she adds, she can hardly be expected to marry a man from Kailashpuri. The 12 months at Westwinn appear to have given her a surface that is also depth, since the new self is part of her just as the older one is. In this, she negotiates her new context in a specific way, one that we might call "moral consumption" (Srivastava 2015, 204). This is the context in which the apparently enterprising and autonomous subject encounters local histories and constraints, adjusting her actions according to circumstance. Mary's father tells me that "we have instilled strong traditional values in her and know that she will not overstep her limits." "Our neighbors," he continues, "never say anything nasty about her [new disposition], because our daughter has never given them an occasion to say anything." Mary, he says, has always been careful to "balance" her life. "Mary will never lose her real self," he continues, "because we have given her strong family values." Thanks to Westwinn, he adds, "she is now rid of her MTI, but she will always remain close to her mother."

Mary knows what she must do: tread a careful path between consuming, controlling emotions, gaining confidence, and expressing "too much" confidence. She is required to be a "moral consumer." Moral consumption differentiates Mary from the young Chinese women employed at the upmarket Sunshine Department Store in the city of Harbin whom Hanser (2005) describes. At Sunshine, the "salesclerk's role was to be overtly feminine and subtly sexual" (Hanser 2005, 594). Unlike the Chinese sales assistants, however, Mary maintains professional and personal lives that are inextricably connected; she can meet the professional demands for a sexualized femininity only if she simultaneously accedes to "the hegemonic practices of the family" (Christy 2017, 18). To advance in her career, Mary must rely on a strategy in which she ventures "out" but returns "home" when required.

Neoliberalism and its subjects

The lived reality of skills trainees complicates straightforward conclusions about new forms of work and the making of "neoliberal" selves in India. The examples I present above suggest that emotional labor may not simply involve losing a "real" self under capital, but, rather, the willful reinstitution of a *split* self as the contemporary subject. This split self can, in turn, serve as an instrument to negotiate an external world of power and dominance and thus to secure a *degree* of agency. Ramesh Ganju from Latehar is one of many among his cohort who, amid insurgency-related violence and facing a dilapidated educational system, seeks to convert lessons in emotional labor, affect, and "self-evaluation" into a government job. And Mary Masih's strategy is to be a moral consumer, that is, both of the world and the family; she negotiates a structure she cannot transform. The "real" self is the *strategic* and the *relational*. It is ready to strike out in many directions to achieve a modicum of autonomy under conditions of great socioeconomic asymmetry and constraint. But it can also sustain older moral bonds of family and community. It is not—in any recognizable way—beset by anxieties over "losing" an "inner" self to an "inauthentic" one that has been acquired through a short-term personality development course.

It is difficult, also, to identify the authentic self among the "warlike" Gujars and Meenas of Dausa that might be displaced by the new market in emotions and affects. For there are, already, multiple Gujar and Meena selves: one that has internalized stereotypical ideas about the inherent characteristics of such communities; a second one that advocates for programs of state and market-led transformation that will effect *changes* in "personality traits" that putatively place these communities at disadvantage; and yet another one that harbors a deep desire for government jobs at an apparent time of entrepreneurialism and individuation. In a place so thick with historical memory—real or imagined—that informs contemporary complexities of identity, it is hard to imagine how one might isolate either the effects of emotional displacement or specific forms of identity that are being unmade through the making of "neoliberal subjects."

There is a split self that moves seamlessly among new opportunities for social mobility offered by the market; family and kin networks that seem to militate against the demands of the market; desire for a government job; a fraught relationship with the state, whose policies create conditions

for violence and Maoist insurgency; and strategic—but not necessarily committed—entrepreneurialism. There is, in other words, a split self that is not necessarily a tormented one, and we might consider theorizing it as a crucial site of contemporary identity rather than debris in modernity's wake (Srivastava 2010). It locates itself simultaneously within pedagogies of transnational affect, global discourses of "time management," and localized temporalities of personal circumstance. Segmentation (Urciuoli 2008) is not an imposition but strategy.

Further, the various training schemes for new personality types involve both state and private entities. This has something to tell us about linkages between new forms of citizenship and its relationship to the state *and* the market. It has been suggested that "the elements that we think of as coming together to create citizenship—rights, entitlements, territoriality, a nation—are becoming disarticulated and rearticulated with forces set into motion by market forces" (Ong 2006, 6). But as my ethnographic vignettes suggest, many people see their articulation with market forces as a path to statist citizenship, that is, a government job. Though the state may increasingly farm out many of its activities to the market, it is still imagined as an entity quite distinct from the latter, offering highly coveted life chances. In the minds of the interlocutors of this article, the state maintains its "stateness" (Abrams 1988).

Despite the troubled relationship with a state that can be both violent (Shah 2006) and obstructionist (Gupta 2012), public sector employment remains highly coveted for the poor in particular and Indian media frequently reports on the "craze" for government jobs (*Economic Times* 2018). For Ramesh Ganju and the Gujar and Meena young men, the market is viewed as an opportunity to hone one's skills and collect certificates that might lead to a government job. And, as far as Mary Masih is concerned, it is the ground on which the gendered constraints of everyday life are negotiated; Mary barters for a degree of freedom—quite extraordinary freedom for a young woman of her socioeconomic background—through tempering her actions to that of a moral consumer. Under such circumstances—deep educational asymmetry, wildly uneven chances of economic mobility, debilitating lack of social and cultural capital—strategies of socioeconomic transformation do not bear the character of an all-or-nothing gambit.

Conclusion: Neoliberalism without its subjects

Rather than displacing longer histories of erratic subjectivities, discourses of "market principles, efficiency, and competitiveness" (Ong 2006, 4) combine with them. It is thus difficult to posit a cause-and-effect relationship between forms of capital and subjectivity or to pinpoint anxieties about transforming identities. There are, of course, anxieties about uncertain life trajectories. But these relate to

how best to position oneself on strategic thresholds and negotiate the possibilities of another life. These thresholds, made of relationships among the state, private capital, the family, and nonstate actors, may not allow us the luxury of speaking either of the stable subject being acted on or easily identifiable processes through which apparently alienated subjects are produced.

Contemporary subaltern populations relate to the state and private capital in complicated ways. But it is undeniable that their aspirations unfold in social and economic contexts where the state is no longer the dominant actor that it was in its developmentalist incarnation. That is, in the early 1990s, "the [Indian] state changed its mind" (Sengupta 2008, 35) and embarked on "the active process of creating space for private capital articulated through a market society" (Roy 2020, 219). It is *within* these transformed circumstances, however, that the subjects of this discussion seek to adopt new—tactical—skins while maintaining older ways of being; decisions are still informed by ideas of kin, caste, feminine modesty, family honor and obligations, and a "permanent" job, decisions that would otherwise seem at odds with what might be expected from fully realized neoliberal subjects.

Moreover, the "trained" selves are not distanced from their "real" ones. The skills they acquire—affective and emotional—cannot be easily characterized as "divorced from their users' everyday social context" (Urciuoli 2008, 224). Rather, they find accommodation within it. That is, a significant aspect of making new selves through soft-skills training consists of willfully fashioning surface and split selves, instead of "authentic" and "whole" ones. If we seek to understand how those in precarious socioeconomic circumstances negotiate change *and* the opportunities it might bring, it is important to consider that they do not mourn the loss of an identity—and the adoption of another. Perhaps, under contemporary conditions of capital—in which soft skills "represent a blurring of lines between self and work by making one rethink and transform one's self to best fit one's job" (Urciuoli 2008, 219)—we might be witnessing something quite specific, at least for the Indian context. This is the crystallization of an identity politics of fragmentation and ephemerality. It is not novel that there exists a "fragmented or multiple nature of self and subjectivity in *all* ethnographic settings" (Osella and Osella 2004, 226; italics in the original). This phenomenon does, however, allow us to think about how relationships between surfaces and depths might form strategies of negotiating structures of deep asymmetries.

In anthropological writings on South Asia, there is a rich history of the fragmented self—an identity that is always becoming and hence not irremediably "damaged" by attachment to *one* essential self that is in the process of dissolution. In his critique of Weber's notion of the "Hindu character" and "inner spirit," which putatively obstructed

the rise of industrial capitalism in India, Singer (1972, 279) noted that "the problematic aspect of Weber's assumptions emerges when the ideal types are confused with empirical realities." The "Hindu industrialists" Singer interviewed in mid-1960s Madras (now Chennai) "do not," he suggested, "experience any strong sense of conflict between the demands of their religion and their mode of life as industrial life" (316). While in their "compartmentalized traditional and modern" lives (350)—a partitioning that is "not complete and rigid" (348)—they may hold ideas regarding an "'inner' and essential core of cultural identity … the 'core' is itself not hard and unchanging" (358). In a similar vein, N. Kumar (2001, 98) speaks of "the plural acculturation" of the 19th-century Indian (male) intelligentsia, which drew on Western education to negotiate a new environment but remained "organically rooted in their communities and families" (N. Kumar 2001, 83). More recently, in her study of study of Sufism in Pakistan, Ewing (1997, 35) frames her argument through the following perspective: "The individual is a complex site of conflicting desires and multiple subjective modalities … [and] the subject is inconstant in its loyalties and usually oblivious to its inconsistencies."

It may be tempting to invoke two important anthropological interventions on self and subjectivity in non-Western societies—Marriott's "dividual" (Marriott 1976) and Strathern's (1988) "partible" selves—as further evidence of the "multiple subjective modalities" that Ewing describes. My objective is not, however, to interrogate "western categories" through either "Hindu transactions" (Marriott 1976) or Melanesian personhood "as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them" (Strathern 1988, 13). I do not seek to identify a bedrock of identity type that lies undisturbed by the processes of, say, industrial life and histories of multiple "global flows" (Appadurai 1996, 29). My argument, rather, is that "personality" is contingent on context and that there might not, in fact, be anything like a historically stable "Indian" character. Attempts to locate such stability are, furthermore, both ahistorical and potentially essentialist. If there is such a thing as an "Indian personality," it results from the intertwining of historically unstable processes and the dynamic ways that Indians engage with the present, including the processes of capital. Strategies of self-making that unfold *through* the disembedding processes of capitalism form the key to understanding these engagements.

Attention to the social and historical circumstance in which capital's subjects engage with it illuminate, as Freeman (2014, 18) shows, both its "dynamic and multifaceted forms" and the varieties of localized engagements. The making of contemporary "entrepreneurial selves" and "neoliberal flexibility" (152) in Barbados, Freeman argues, is linked to changes in historical notions of work with roots in the colonial economies of class, gender, and race. Ideas of "reputational flexibility" (35)—which earlier referred to *working-class* ingenuity and inventiveness—have increasingly become part of the refashioning of middle-class identities; in Freeman's study, "reputational flexibility" and "neoliberal flexibility" come together in unexpected ways and require an understanding of the grounds where global capitalism meets local histories. In the Indian context, I conceptualize this as *relational flexibility*—the strategic and concurrent participation in both "pre-neoliberal" networks and market processes. Relational flexibility shapes the identities and behaviors of the subjects of policies aimed at creating entrepreneurial selves. It produces, at best, an inconsistent entrepreneurialism: soft-skills trainees are neither strictly neoliberal nor singularly entrenched in "pre-neoliberal" networks; they engage in strategic maneuvers of the self (Gershon 2011). The surface self performs neoliberal flexibility, but the skin-deep performances contain and undermine the possibilities of producing an enduring neoliberal subject. As in Barbados, different histories make for varied engagements with capitalism.

A context in which the surface is also depth—and marked by inconsistencies of being and believing—is one in which "new quasi-entrepreneurial and market models of action" (Burchell 1993, 274) encounter identities of caste and "tribe," long-standing desires for the state, erratic capitalism, political violence, and deep entrenchment within family and kin networks. It is a context characterized by neoliberal processes that do not necessarily produce neoliberal subjects. That is, given the kinds of political, economic, and social worlds in which the subjects of soft-skills training are located—marked by severe obstacles to the "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004)—it is important to focus on the differences between how neoliberal policies imagine the world and quotidian negotiations with them. A fuller engagement with localized ethnographies of capitalism may also require a change in perspective. This concerns the invocation of neoliberalism as a "rhetorical trope, where the meaning is already known to those who would be interested in the topic" (Flew 2014, 52). It may be just as important to explore its analytical possibilities by reflecting on the "contested and contradictory" (Gooptu 2013, 24) ways that socially and economically marginal populations imagine new relationships between the state and private capital as grounds for altered futures.

Notes

its "Collaborative Research Programme on Urban Transformation in India" (2018).

1. Names of all interlocutors and the organizations that run skills training programs have been changed to maintain anonymity.

2. One of the most famous athletes of his time, Kapil Dev was part of the Indian cricket team from 1978 to 1994. His public image was that of a small-town boy made good and someone unfamiliar with "metropolitan" Indian culture.

3. See, for example, Babu's (2020) analysis of Dalit anti-caste movements' use of "neoliberal" personality-development courses to challenge social hierarchies.

4. AoL, a guru-based movement, was founded in 1981 by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (Ikegame and Copeman 2012). It offers a variety of yoga and meditation-based programs aimed at white-collar professionals (https://www.artofliving.org/in-en).

5. The "martial races" idea developed in the aftermath of the 1857 Indian mutiny. Certain ethnicities, such as Sikhs and Gurkhas, were identified as both "noble" and particularly suitable as soldiers. Others—usually those identified as troublemakers during the mutiny—were removed from recruitment processes (Omissi 1991).

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Sanjay Srivastava
Department of Anthropology and Sociology
SOAS University of London

ss204@soas.ac.uk