

Research Article

Intersectionality of Caste and Class on Perceptions of Academic Ability in Multilingual Classrooms in India

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Received: March 2, 2024
Accepted: November 10, 2024
Published: December 30, 2024
doi: [10.5281/zenodo.15237640](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15237640)

Situated within the theoretical framework of DisCrit, which argues the need for critical understandings of the intersection between disability, class, language, race, gender, and sexuality, within the field of disability studies (Annamma et al., 2018), this paper examines caste and class as intersectional social constructs that affect the quality of education for academically struggling children in India. It examines how struggling students are marginalized due to teachers' perceptions of academic ability, often leading to labeling as disabled, and discusses the implications of the global demand for English-speaking skills on low-income students who are learning English for the first time in school. Using a case study approach, this qualitative research study employed extensive

observations and in-depth interviews with teachers and parents at six schools in India. Teachers' perceptions reflected the broader national caste hierarchies. In low-fee-paying schools, where most students' families were migrant workers and had received no education, the teachers attributed their students' academic challenges to their socioeconomic background. In high-fee schools, where families' backgrounds and English-speaking skills paralleled their own, teachers tended to develop equitable and respectful relationships and provided additional support to students. The paper makes the case for recognizing the contextual uniqueness of intersectional attributes in multilingual classrooms in the Global South.

Keywords: caste and class; DisCrit; intersectionality; multilingual classrooms; social hierarchies

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of English language policies on poor children in India—who often lack access to fluent spoken English and quality reading instruction—has only recently begun to be studied (Bhattacharya, 2013; Boruah, 2017; Kalyanpur, 2022; Kalyanpur et al., 2023; Mohan, 2017). In India, caste is a major marker of socioeconomic status: most low-income students are also from the so-called lower caste groups. Five out of six multidimensionally poor individuals in India belong to Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), or Other Backward Class (OBC) households. Although SC and OBCs constitute 65% of the Hindu population, they have the highest multidimensional poverty rates of 33.3% and 27.2% respectively of any caste group with ST at more than 50% (Pradhan et al., 2022). Further, SC/ST children are over-represented among the first generation learners (Singh, 2023).

India has endorsed the United Nation's development agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals by consolidating its Education for All pre-school to class XII

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program, called the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, in 2018 to “ensure that all children have access to quality education with an equitable and inclusive classroom environment which should take care of their diverse background, multilingual needs, different academic abilities and make them active participants in the learning process” (Department of School Education and Literacy, 2023). The program covers 156 million students, many of whom are first generation learners and bi/multilingual. Many other millions of students are covered through private-public partnerships under the Corporate Social Responsibility Act, which require corporations to contribute 3% of their profits towards social sector charitable development (Chattopadhyay & Roy, 2017; Juneja, 2017; LaDousa, 2017). Private schools constitute approximately 35 % of the total number of schools, accounting for 70% to 85% of student enrolment (Narang & Sudhakar, 2022). Low-fee-paying (LFP) schools, also known as budget private schools, low-cost private schools or affordable private schools, are particularly attractive to low-income students over the free government schools because many offer English as the medium of instruction, tapping into the perception of access to English as a means to an aspirational lifestyle through elite higher education institutions and/or better jobs.

While the British Raj limited access to English to the elite classes as part of their ‘downward filtration’ policy, this stratification continued well past Independence when states were established along linguistic lines (Upadhyay, 2012). Despite UNESCO’s exhortations over the years that providing an education in a student’s mother tongue is the most effective way to learn, vested interests within the upper-caste elite have resisted efforts by the Indian government to valorize Indian languages (Kalyanpur et al., 2023). As a result, even as recently as 2019, only 17% of the population spoke English (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2019), which has continued to maintain its premier status as an official language along with Hindi, a language spoken by only 44% of the population. The Three Language Formula national language policy was envisaged with the objective of strengthening Indian languages in education and provides for states to offer three languages at primary level: the first (home language) as the medium of instruction, and a second and third language as school subjects. Following this policy, students are taught in their regional language, which may or may not be the same as their mother-tongue and learn Hindi, one of the official languages, as a second language (Boruah, 2023). Scholars have raised the concern that this hierarchy of language/medium of instruction in the latest 2020 National Education Policy reduces access to English for SC/ST students, a skill increasingly seen as necessary to compete within today’s globalized world and the best higher education institutions which are all English-medium (Boruah, 2023; Singh, 2023).

The economic liberalization that occurred in the early 1990s, leading to deeper inroads into the education sector by the private sector, furthered the shift towards English as a highly valued commodity. With some Dalit scholars exhorting Dalit students to learn English as the means to upward mobility (e.g., Illaiah, 2007, 2013; Kumar, 2021) and the expansion of educational options capitalizing on this lifestyle aspiration, low-fee-paying, private English-medium schools have become ubiquitous (Tooley, 2009),

resulting in more and more low-income students seeking an English-medium, private education regardless of the quality of this education, in the belief that their access to English will be worth the investment (ASER, 2024; Kumar, 2017; Mohan, 2017).

Based on a study conducted in six schools, this paper examines caste and class as intersectional constructs that affect the quality of education for academically struggling children in India. It analyzes the processes by which struggling students are marginalized by teachers' perceptions of what makes a good student, and the implications of the global demand for English-speaking skills on low-income students who are learning English for the first time in school. The intersectionality of caste and class is particularly complex in the Indian context (Shankar, 2023). Suryanarayan (2019) notes that social status identities, such as caste, as an inherited rank that comes through descent, tend to over-ride economic attributes, such as class; for instance, she found that poor Brahmins are more likely to vote along caste lines against reservation policies in education, even if this affects their economic prospects.

Scholars have also asserted that, because of “the sticky floor effect” of their caste status, the poorest of the poor continue to be excluded from school (Mosse, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2022). Government-aided schools are required to maintain caste demographics of their students; thus, a glance at school records would have revealed students' caste affiliations. However, the purpose of this study was not to reify caste categories. Instead, it sought to interrogate the assumptions behind so-called lower and upper-castes statuses (Dutt, 2019; Yengde, 2019) and understand how these social constructions and teachers' perceptions of difference play out in educational contexts.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bourdieu's theory of linguistic cultural capital and unexamined exclusion suggests that a “pre-established harmony” between historical legacies and educational systems often results in a “social selection” which legitimizes cultural reproduction and converts social hierarchies to academic hierarchies, thus perpetuating social inequalities as “teachers' judgements on their pupils transmute social classifications into school classifications” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. xxiv). Within the Indian context, it could be said that the perceived and actual social and economic advantages of English-speaking elites, as part of the postcolonial historical legacy, have provided the justification for English as a medium of instruction in schools, thus re-creating social class structures in schools. Since the “new India” of the 1990s (Deb, 2011), the proliferation of low-fee-paying schools that offer English as a medium of instruction have attracted families from these aspirational strata.

Situated at the intersection of postcolonial and disability studies, which share a pivotal imbrication of the process of ‘othering’ or the creation of a perception of difference that is mostly deficit-based (Annamma et al., 2018; Kliever & Fitzgerald, 2001; Motha, 2014;

Simpson, 2007), this paper examines the influence of the colonial legacy of English on multilingual and, in particular, low-income students in India, whereby they are labeled learning disabled. It uses a postcolonial lens to examine the hegemony of linguistic cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Motha, 2014) with the emergence of English as the current global lingua franca, drawing on Phillipson's (1992) framework of linguistic imperialism, which asserts that English language teaching perpetuates the political-economic dominance of Global North over Global South. The study is also situated within the theoretical framework of DisCrit, which argues the need for critical understandings of the intersection between disability, class, language, race, gender, and sexuality (Annamma et al., 2018; Erevelles, 2011; Ferri & Connor, 2005). This stance recognizes that the intersectionality of micro-cultural components of identity already perceived as disadvantaged can exacerbate the effects of discrimination. Based on the assumption that both caste and disability are social constructs that impact on students' material realities (Erevelles, 2011), the study explored the extent to which teachers' preconceived notions of deficit based on social hierarchies such as caste influence their perceptions of school failure.

Scholars building on Foucauldian theory have argued that the perception of the “Other” created during colonialism to justify slavery and imperialism informed the perception of difference, based on, for instance, physical attributes or language (Loomba, 2016; Said, 1979). The “gaze” (or the act of seeing that defines a specific, usually negative, perception of the onlooker of imperial subjects of so-called “other races”) dehumanizes the person or persons being gazed at while allowing the gazer to engage in a sense of their own perceived superiority. In the context of DisCrit, a “pathologizing gaze” leads to perceptions of deficits of ability and the marginalization of specific groups of students in educational systems (Shalaby, 2017). As Gramsci (1971) noted, this perception of superiority is then translated into a cultural hegemony that assumes these perceptions or beliefs to be universal and imposes them in ways that render the oppressed unaware of their oppression.

Within our current context, this postcolonial hegemony assumes that “knowledge produced from the social/historical experiences and world views of the Global South, also known as ‘non-Western’, are considered inferior and not part of the canon of thought” (Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 75), a hierarchy that has extended to the linguistic hegemony of colonial languages with the gradual evolution of English as the global lingua franca. A postcolonial lens also allows scrutiny of the additional hegemony of the upper caste within the Indian context. The exclusion of so-called lower castes from educational spaces has persisted through the ages with types and levels of education commensurate with caste. While Brahmin males were given access to sacred learning, the middle and lower castes learned the craft of royal leadership, and trade and business. Dalits, however, were deemed unworthy of receiving any education (Nambissan, 2009; Vulli, 2014). More recently, researchers have pointed to the exclusion of so-called lower castes in the 2020 National Education Policy and the National Curriculum (Singh, 2023; Bhattacharya, 2013; Kalyanpur et al., 2023) in terms

of access to education and curricular content. Singh (2023) asserts that higher dropout rates for Scheduled Caste/Tribe and Other Backward Class students than those in the general category, among other indicators, suggest a “chaturvarna” or four-tier educational system that parallels caste tiers within society. The hierarchy of language that leads to limited access to English complicates this segregation further to where, as Bhatia (2018) puts it, “English is the new caste.”

Using these lenses, this intersection of caste and class becomes particularly salient in English-medium schools where, as this study shows, access to English is calibrated at several levels: fluency in speaking, by accents, or being conversant with American/western cultural references and slang. This linguistic inequity combines with age-old perceptions of caste difference, whereby through the weaponizing of language, caste hierarchies are played out in how students are labeled, disciplinary practices and classroom seating arrangements, and teachers’ interactions with students’ families.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Context

Urbanization was introduced by the colonial state and reinforced after Independence. In India, cities were first developed under the British Raj, generating “new caste and class hierarchies as the traditionally landed elite became the propertied class in the new cities” (Juneja, 2017, p. 28). The post-colonial decision of the newly independent nation states to follow the same path of urbanization towards development was both deliberate and encouraged by international aid, precipitating large-scale rural to urban migration (Bhagat, 2017). Indeed, Juneja (2017) notes that a quarter of the entire Indian urban population is concentrated in just five ‘mega’ cities – Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, and Bengaluru. However, few urban planning policies were put into place to accommodate this onrush of people to the outskirts of large metropolitan cities, leading to the creation of slums or bastis that grew larger and larger, without basic amenities of water, sewage, or electricity (Bhagat, 2017; Bhatia, 2018). A forced dependence on wages and external employment sources resulted in urban poverty that was more acute than the poverty of subsistence living in rural areas. For instance, studies found higher levels of malnutrition among children living in slums than in rural areas (Persha & Rao, 2003). Low-fee-paying, English-medium schools located in neighborhoods close to bastis are most likely to attract students from the bastis precisely because, for one, they have a government-imposed cap on fees, making them comparatively more affordable to low-income families, and for another, they offer their students access to the much sought after skill of knowing English.

Conducted in Mumbai, India, over a four-month period, this study focused on three low-fee-paying (LFP) schools, two high-tier schools and one middle-tier school. Schooling tiers are established primarily by their tuition rates, whereby families are constrained by

their income status to specific tiers of schools. All the schools offered English as the medium of instruction. Five of the schools in the study, including all three LFP schools, were located within a two-kilometer radius of each other in a small sliver of south-central Mumbai that has seen extremely rapid development since the 1990s. The LFP schools were in the poorest section of the neighborhood, the basti, while one high-tier and one middle-tier school were in the more middle-class parts. The sixth, a high-tier school was in the poshest, original colonial part of the city in South Mumbai, about 20 kilometers away. Students in LFP and middle-tier schools spoke a variety of regional languages at home, including Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, Bhojpuri, and Tamil, with the middle-tier students speaking some English as well, while students in the high-tier school tended to speak English at home as their parents were equally fluent in the language. The study used an ethnographic qualitative research methodology through a case study approach, which provides opportunities for an in-depth exploration of a unit of analysis at the micro-level to understand a sociocultural phenomenon occurring at a macro-level (Schwandt & Gates, 2018; Yin, 2014).

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative research methods of extensive observations and in-depth interviews were used (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glesne, 2016), since the purpose was to understand the “social contexts in which policy and reform imperatives are reshaped in schools, often in unintended or unexpected ways” (Sriprakash, 2011, p. 6). Further, the study foregrounded teachers at the LFP schools as research on teachers’ perspectives of educational change in the Indian context is limited (Sriprakash, 2011). Classroom observations were followed up with individual interviews with the teachers in an iterative process to learn how they interpreted their own instruction and implementation of inclusion (Mukhopadhyay, 2020). Classroom observations were conducted in grades 3 to 5, at the administrators’ suggestion, since they felt students would be most likely to demonstrate academic difficulties by then.

I also spoke to teachers at other grade levels in the teachers’ lounge and observed some remedial class sessions conducted in the schools. While interviews (Brinkmann, 2018) were conducted with a variety of participants, for the purposes of this paper, I focused on the data from the parents and teachers. Interviews were conducted in Hindi with the LFP parents and in English with all other participants. Similarly, while document analysis (Bowen, 2009) was conducted with national policies, student work samples, and class textbooks, for the purposes of this paper, I focused on my analysis of textbooks. The participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis provided depth and detail (Patton, 1980) and allowed for the triangulation of data (Denzin, 2012).

Seven teachers from the LFP schools and seven from the upper-tier schools were interviewed and observed at least twice each. Four teachers in the LFP schools were

observed and interviewed numerous times. Additionally, eleven parents from across the schools were interviewed individually. Sometimes other parents would join in as I interviewed a parent. I also observed interactions between parents and teachers in classrooms and during remedial sessions. Jot notes taken during interviews and observations were written up more extensively as fieldnotes totaling close to 400 single-spaced, typewritten pages.

Data was analyzed using a recursive, constant comparison approach (Charmaz, 2014). For instance, as I began to analyze the data that I was collecting at the LFP schools, I found that English as a medium of instruction was a significant factor in creating students' academic difficulties in these schools. When assessing them informally, I noticed that they understood the concepts much more easily in Hindi. In sharing these findings with university faculty, as part of member check processes, I was advised to include some upper-tier schools where students' fluency in English might be less of an impacting factor. This led me to spend some time observing at three upper-tier schools. This was punctuated with analytic memos to identify themes and when data saturation had occurred. Data saturation was considered reached when no new themes emerged from the data. A combination of manual coding and NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, was used to develop codes and categories for a thematic analysis toward a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2007; Kolb, 2012).

Both deductive coding, or top-down codes based on a theoretical framework, and inductive coding, or bottom-up development of codes (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021), were applied toward identifying themes that ran across the data. For instance, some initial codes included student descriptors, such as “coming from slum areas,” “uneducated parents” and “ten-rupee students,” which were categorized as differences in caste/class status, developing into a theme of the school as a reflection of societal hierarchy and teachers' limited agency within recent neoliberal education reforms. This theme, among others, led to a grounded theory of teachers' perceptions of and efforts to teach first-generation students in English-medium LFP schools within the context of education for all. (For more details on the methodology, see Kalyanpur, 2022.)

4. RESULTS

The study explored the imbrication of caste/class and knowledge of English with teachers' perceptions of and interactions with so-called lower caste/low-income students. This paper draws primarily from empirical data from the LFP schools, using the high-tier schools as points of comparison, to highlight two main themes that emerged: (a) how facility with English generates new “castes” with a hierarchy of accents, fluency, and familiarity with cultural tropes and relevance; and (b) how the weaponizing effects of language as a disciplinary mechanism is manifested through teachers' descriptors of students and their affect and tone in their interactions with students and families.

4.1 Facility with English as a Marker of Social Status

According to Bhatia (2018), the development of English as the “new caste” reflects the lack of access to quality education that has dogged India’s educational system. Initially intended as a gatekeeping mechanism under colonial rule to identify only the best and the brightest who would then serve in the Imperial Civil Services, the limited investment by the government in schools in independent India and the continued reliance on English in higher education has only furthered this bottleneck. This study found that school hierarchies were maintained or exacerbated by differences in teachers’ and students’ facility with English. Markers of facility with English included differences in accents and levels of fluency in speaking, as well as familiarity with Eurocentric cultural references and tropes in the curriculum.

4.1.1 Hierarchies of English Reflected Through Accents and Fluency

English fluency and accent differences reinforced school hierarchies. All the teachers at the upper-tier schools themselves came from backgrounds where English was spoken at home. These teachers spoke “convent school English,” which is fluent, unaccented by any regional language undertones, and based on the Queen’s English (Bhatia, 2018; Deb, 2011). It is the English of elite India. The students at these schools also came from elite backgrounds and enjoyed the same level of comfort with English. Although the students continued to show their teachers respect through their affect, this similarity in backgrounds marked by a shared facility with English contributed to a less pronounced difference in status, as they chatted easily with their teachers in academic and informal English. They exchanged jokes and references to Hollywood movies or celebrities with their teachers and among themselves. Both schools had libraries which included classic English books like *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Jungle Book*, and *Treasure Island*.

The teachers at the middle-tier school had attended similarly middle status schools themselves and were fluent and comfortable enough in English to teach in it; having made the leap from middle-class to upper middle, they now spoke English at home as well with their children. Yet, the teachers in the middle-tier schools also struggled with their uncertainty about what was “correct” English. For instance, in a lesson on Aesop’s fable of the hare and the tortoise, one of the students pronounced tortoise as ‘tor-toyse’ which is typically how many Indians pronounce it (in an Indian accent, where it is said as it is phonetically spelt). The teacher corrected him, telling him it was pronounced ‘tor-tis’, which is the “outer-circle” or Queen’s English pronunciation. However, soon after, she showed the students a video made in India that illustrated the fable, in which the word was pronounced as ‘tortoyse’. Asked about this in a post-observation interview, she explained, “I try to correct them, but if this is the way they know how to say the word, maybe it’s okay. Maybe both ‘tortoyse’ and ‘tortis’ are correct.” The students spoke in English during the academic sections of class and in Hindi or Marathi among

themselves in informal, spontaneous situations. Although the teachers were well-liked, the easy camaraderie that was so apparent and prevalent in the upper-tier schools was missing in the middle-tier school as students and teachers engaged much less in informal interactions, resulting in some distancing and formality in the student-teacher relationship.

The teachers at the LFP schools had learnt English at school, rather than at home. Although the interviews were conducted in the hybridized “Indian English”, also referred to as Hinglish and generally considered a lower form of English, among themselves and in the teachers’ lounge, they spoke in Marathi or Hindi. While their own middle-class backgrounds had enabled them to go to middle tier private schools where they had learned English, they rarely spoke it at home. One of them mentioned that her children now preferred speaking in English at home, so she would speak to them in English, but the primary language was still Marathi. They had been hired at these LFP schools because of their English-speaking skills.

However, the English they taught was the hybridized Indian English, spoken in regional accents. They often read aloud entire chapters from the textbooks, as the most expeditious means of instruction, but with many miscues. For instance, they would drop “the” in several places and mispronounce unfamiliar or infrequently used words (e.g., ‘pottable’ for ‘potable’; ‘cores’ for ‘chores’; ‘guards’ for ‘gourds’; ‘grolled’ for ‘growled’). As teachers, they were constrained both by the fact that English was not their first language and that they had not received any instruction in how to teach English as a second language. Their students, unfamiliar with English outside of the academic context, spoke among themselves and with the teachers in Hindi or Marathi. Their use of English in informal contexts was limited to standard statements like, “May I come in?” or “Good morning, teacher!”, and they struggled to participate in class because of the English only policy in the schools. Some teachers compromised on this policy during their own instruction by resorting to translating the text; acknowledging their students’ multilingualism, they recognized this was more likely to facilitate students’ comprehension of the text. However, they did so with some trepidation, knowing that this was frowned upon by management and they would expect responses only in English from their students. This led to only the students who had some facility with English providing the answers when asked, and these were often the same students.

Further, the teachers frequently rejected students’ responses if they were in Hindi or in grammatically incorrect English even if the answers were conceptually accurate and attested to students’ comprehension. For instance, when asked what the man in the picture was doing, one student responded, translating directly from Hindi, “He is clothes washing.” Although the student showed her grasp of the right vocabulary, the teacher rejected her answer because it was grammatically incorrect. Similarly, during a phonics lesson, when asked to identify words that started with the [b] sound, one student excitedly pointed to the light bulb and said ‘bathi’, the word for light in Hindi.

Here too, even though the student clearly understood the phonetic sound, the teacher rejected the answer because the answer was not an English word.

As Bourdieu (1990) notes, linguistic cultural capital becomes a mechanism for social hierarchies to parallel academic hierarchies. The differing levels of fluency, desirable accent and familiarity with English across the tiers of schools reflects the larger societal class structure, often based on caste in India. Although the teachers in the LFP schools were aware that their students would benefit from providing instruction in familiar languages, they were compelled by the English only policy, itself a reflection of the market forces and neoliberal economy, to insist that students respond in English. As a result, teachers' unfamiliarity with English in the LFP and even in the middle tier schools, affected their efficacy as teachers, where they became unwilling to accept conceptually correct but grammatically incorrect answers, which, in turn, reified their perceptions of these students as academically struggling and, ultimately, disabled. By the same token, the language barrier reinforces systemic exclusion for the LFP students by depriving them of both a quality education and access to what might be considered quality English. Through the lens of DisCrit, for many of these students, the label of learning disability is the result of its conflation with language difference (Ferri & Connor, 2005). The fact that there are students who are struggling academically has been reified as a deficit intrinsic to the student and the assumption is that it is the student, not the educational structures, that needs fixing.

4.1.2 Familiarity with Cultural Tropes in the Curricular Content

The hierarchies of English were also reflected in teachers' familiarity with the cultural tropes embedded in the curriculum. Scholars have argued that curriculum is a mechanism that facilitates the cultural reproduction of market fundamentalism, churning out millions of students with skills that are assumed to be of value in today's capitalist globalized economies (Collin & Apple, 2010). It creates the myth that students graduating from, say, a rural school anywhere in the world can aspire to and procure jobs in a transnational organization in a national metropolis or overseas, if they just work hard enough to excel at school, perpetuating additional myths of ability and meritocracy (Parekh, 2017). A major criticism against the educational system in India is its curriculum: its vastness that students must master for the school-leaving exam, and its irrelevance to students' everyday lives (Singh, 2023). Although the proliferation of local printing houses means that textbooks are being published within the country, the content of the curriculum still lacks much connection to students' lives. The issue of vastness of curriculum was frequently brought up by the teachers in all the middle-tier and LFP schools in the study. They complained about having no time to pause to support students along the way because they had to rush through the curriculum and complete the "exam portion" before the end of the next assessment period. The

continuous cycle of evaluation placed as much stress on them as on their students. As one of the teachers explained, “The State Board is giving us this curriculum, so we have to teach it.”

Perhaps because English was not the first language for the teachers in the low-fee-paying schools, the textbook became gospel, resulting in a most unexpected hierarchical dynamic between the teacher and the textbook. This is understandable in an educational system where the curriculum must be followed faithfully. However, even when there were errors in the textbook that the teachers were aware of, the teachers would not admit to them nor suggest that they be corrected. In one situation, the LFP teacher has just finished teaching a lesson on common items in the classroom. She had taught it by writing the title on the board, quite correctly, as “Things in the Classroom”, and then asked students to name objects they could see in the room, which she then wrote down on the board. After developing a fairly exhaustive list, she asked them to open their textbooks, where, it turned out, the lesson was titled, “Words in a Classroom”. It was clear that she realized that this was wrong because she did address the mistake as being a title different from hers. But her response was not to admit that the textbook was wrong but to provide the explanation that since they were learning the words for things in the classroom, the title said words. Similarly, in this same lesson, when the teacher solicited the names of classroom items from the students by asking in English, “What thing is called?”, the students offered the Indian English words like ‘rubber’ for eraser and ‘color’ for crayon, as the words they are more familiar with. However, when they moved to the textbook “to learn proper words nicely” as she put it, she had them copy out the words that matched those in their textbook even if they did not recognize them.

In another instance, when students were learning that earthen or masonry bunds were used to store river water, the teacher correctly spelt the word earthen on the board, only to be told by a student that it was spelled “earthern” in the textbook. Rather than pointing out that the textbook was wrong, the teacher’s reaction was to tell the student to let it go. Much like the middle-tier teacher who decided that both Indian and British pronunciations of the word tortoise were acceptable, the teachers in the LFP schools were reluctant to challenge the authority of the textbook as the source of correct English, even in the face of blatant errors, because of their own uncertainty about the language.

Across all the schools, none of the teachers questioned the relevance or cultural appropriateness of the curriculum. In an LFP school, I observed 3rd grade students being introduced to phonics, learning the letters of the alphabet and their letters sounds to words like *igloo* and *kangaroo*, which they may not have heard in any context before. The problem of the curricular content not connecting to students’ lives was equally relevant in the middle-tier school. The illustrations in many of the textbooks seemed to depict Indian children, primarily because the girls wore two plaits, a typically Indian hairstyle for young girls, but they wore skirts and had pale, not brown faces. Some of the stories, comprehension paragraphs, and exercises used Indian names, but not consistently. In one English language arts lesson I observed, students worked on a story

in their textbook titled “Ben’s Christmas Wish”. The illustrations depicted a little white/American boy and his mother. The story was about this boy, Ben, who wishes his father didn’t have to go in to work so the two of them could decorate their Christmas tree. The mother consoles him by suggesting he write a letter to Santa Claus, and he wonders if he should ask for a puppy, but finally settles for asking for his dad’s return. Soon after, his father returns home because there was too much snow making the roads impassable. The story is redolent of tropes associated with middle-class, white America – decorating a Christmas tree, writing a letter to Santa, asking for a puppy, getting snow-bound – that would not typically be familiar customs or events in India, even among the 2% of its Christian population. It is a testament to the power of globalization and the hegemony of American mass media that children and adults alike in India are, indeed, now acculturated to Christmas, so that it is called Christmas in all social tiers and not *Bada Din*, the Hindi word for it, and has come to be celebrated with much pomp and gusto, especially among the upper elite. However, these cultural references in the textbook were not relatable to the students.

Similarly, through reading comprehension passages, students were gradually becoming familiarized with Valentine’s Day and terms like “playing jump rope” rather than skipping rope and activities like “taking a hike”. However, this content was still quite removed from the students’ everyday lives. Bhatia (2018) describes the overtly western curriculum in soft skills training to young recruits in the information and technology industry, where participants were expected to correct passages in Indian English but appreciate the slang of Australian and American English. As he notes, the subliminal messages conveyed was that Indian English was somehow deficit, while even the slang of “native speakers” was something to be admired and mimicked. Similarly, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), required for non-native speakers entering higher education in Europe and Australia, contains cultural biases (Freimuth, 2016). Students are expected to successfully answer comprehension passages about the qualities of snow and cars getting booted because of wrongful parking.

On the other hand, the students in the upper tier schools found it easier to connect the content to their own more globalized lives. For instance, in a Grade 10 lesson on economics, students were learning very technical information about horizontal integration and internal growth in the context of a case study about Tata, a well-known corporation in India, moving into new markets by purchasing the government-owned international airline, Air India. Despite the technical nature of the lesson, students made immediate connections to their experiences with international travel. One student spoke about traveling on the Air India Dreamliner 747, while another commented on the length of international flights. “They’re so long. It took 16 hours from Bombay to the capital, I forgot the name,” he said, and then remembering, “Washington, DC!” Another student said, “They’re always adding new destinations.” “It might take longer to the west coast,” said yet another student. Even though these connections seemed tangential to the issue of horizontal integration in economics, the students were more engaged in the

lesson and were able to understand the monetary benefits to the Tata company in purchasing the airline.

In summary, in classrooms across the tiers of schooling, not only is there a hierarchy that places English above other regional languages, but there also exists an additional hierarchy among the varieties of English spoken in India, reflected through accents, fluency and the cultural tropes embedded in the school curriculum. The most desirable accents are those spoken by teachers and students in the upper-tier schools, who have the most fluency in the language as well. Students in the upper-tier schools are also most likely to be familiar with the strongly western-based concepts and content in the curriculum, giving them an edge over the students in the middle tier and low-fee-paying schools in being able to relate to the subject matter more easily or see the relevance of it. These findings reinforce Singh's assertion (2023) on the invisibility of Dalit and Other Backward Caste students in the National Education Policy regarding the lack of relevance of the curriculum to their lives and the social distancing that results from the linguistic hierarchy which valorizes English and not the regional or indigenous languages they speak.

For the LFP students, the English they were being exposed to through the teachers with their regional accents and mispronunciations and through the curriculum with its highly westernized cultural tropes was so removed from the highly desirable convent accents of the English-speaking elite and their own lived experiences in the basti, that the aspirational purpose of attending an English-medium school as an avenue to social mobility was, to all extents and purposes, defeated. The teachers themselves have little agentic control, or the power or opportunity to make choices or exert control (Bandura, 1999), over the system. Aware of their precarious position within this hierarchy of linguistic cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), and constrained by a lack of preparedness, they became uncertain of their own competence, even in the face of textbook errors and evidence that the English only school policy was not serving their students. As a result, formally institutionalized mechanisms, such as the English only policy and the westernized curriculum, serve to perpetuate English as the new caste.

4.2 Weaponizing Effects of Language as a Disciplinary Mechanism

Traditionally, the role of a teacher as the guru has been accorded high respect within Indian culture (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2014). Across all the schools, all the teachers were treated with considerable respect by the students, and where the caste/class differences between teachers and students were less pronounced, as in the upper-tier schools, the teachers themselves responded to their students with caring. However, in the low-fee-paying schools, despite this expectation of de facto respect, teachers felt the need to further exert their authority over the students to emphasize the social distance in class and caste that existed between them and their students. As a result, the LFP teachers

tended to be much more authoritarian than those in the upper- and middle-tier schools. The words and tone or affect they used to describe their students and to talk to their students and their families to establish this authority manifested an aspect of raciolinguistics through which language becomes weaponized (Samy Alim, 2014).

4.2.1 Student Descriptors

The LFP schoolteachers' biases against students from lower castes than them and families who were uneducated were embedded in their description of the students as "coming from slum areas." As one teacher said in an interview: "They are all from lower caste. They are all from slum areas. Some are migrant labor, coming from rural areas. They also are living in slum areas." When asked what they meant by "coming from slum areas", they explained this in terms of parents being illiterate or uneducated, who needed to be educated about school. One third-grade teacher said in an interview: "Parents are not understanding.... They are illiterate. So, we have to explain, we will teach discipline to your child. Please come to school on time. Please finish your homework. So, the parents also learn."

They disapproved of parents who gave their children ten rupees to buy "packet snacks" from authorized street vendors instead of sending homemade packed breakfast or tea snacks. They believed these students came from uncaring families and referred to them as "ten-rupee students", this being the cost of the packet snacks. Students who struggled academically because of the expectation of having to learn English while simultaneously learning in English were often seated in the back of the class and referred to as the "back-benchers". One teacher called these students her "superhero duffers". As she explained:

I have to be very firm with them. They are sitting at the back and they are not concentrating. Instead, they are talking continuously. I have to shout at them. They are coming from the slum areas, and their parents are not educated. They are understanding only the danda (stick). They are not understanding about doing homework, bringing the books to school.

4.2.2 Affect and Tone of Interactions with Students and Families

In addition to the disparaging words used to describe their students, the LFP teachers also expressed their social distance through their tone and affect in their interactions with the students and their families. They managed the classroom using strict disciplinary measures that created a sense of fear in the students and were much more likely to respond harshly to certain behaviors than their counterparts in the upper and middle-tier schools. They overlooked many behaviors that might typically have elicited some disciplinary response: a student hitting another student hard, students looking out

of the window obviously not paying attention, the considerably high levels of noise generated when lessons ended and students would begin to chatter among themselves while the teachers sat in the front of the class checking students' homework. However, behaviors deemed unacceptable elicited disciplinary measures such as public shaming, corporal punishment, and yelling. Further, the same students tended to be targeted: these were the academically struggling students, the students at the back of the class, and the students who did not have uniforms (because they were too poor to afford them). Most significantly, these instances of discipline were conducted in the local language, despite the English-only policy in the LFP schools, suggesting that the teachers wanted to ensure that the students understood them.

In one instance of public shaming that I observed, a teacher held up one student's book for the whole class to see. "Is this a circle?" she asked in English. The hand-drawn circle she was referring to was not perfectly circular. "No!" chorused the class. The teacher then berated the student loudly in Hindi about not producing a perfect circle. In another instance, an LFP teacher checked the length of hair of the boys to determine if they needed a haircut. Speaking in Hindi, she ran her hand through the hair of three boys and if any part of their hair stuck out over her fingers, she told them their hair was too long and that they had to get it cut by Monday or they could not come to class. When she came to a plump boy with soft, round facial features, she conducted the same interchange, except that in his case, she took the headband off the girl sitting next to him and put it on his head, as if to suggest that his hair was long enough to make him look like a girl. Bringing him to the front of the classroom, she said in Hindi to the giggling class, "See how pretty he is looking!" In yet another instance of public shaming, the teacher who referred to her struggling students as "superhero duffers" asked two of them to come to the front and read aloud a passage in English from their textbook. Although the first boy read the passage quite fluently, she stopped him mid-sentence to ask the class, "Can anyone hear?" "No!" chorused the class. Turning back to the boy, she scolded him in Hindi, "Read loudly! You're a boy!" The second boy had more difficulty reading, which prompted another student to call out, "What superhero? He can't read!" and the teacher to admonish the struggler, again in Hindi, "See! You're talking continuously at the back."

I also observed the LFP teachers rapping students on their knuckles with a ruler or slapping the back of students' heads with the flat of their hand quite vigorously. During one observation, one of the "back-bencher" students in the class pulled on the identification lanyard of the student in front of him, causing the second student to fall back as he choked. The teacher walked swiftly up to the first student, whacked him hard on his back with her hand with a violence that was quite stunning, and shouted at him for hurting his classmate. Later, after class, she mentioned to me that the backbencher's poor academic performance had triggered her anger. "First of all, he's not studying only. Then on top, he's not listening when I am teaching."

Yelling at students was commonplace. When soliciting answers from them during a lesson, several teachers allowed the class to get unbearably noisy as students raised their hands and shouted “Teacher! Teacher!” to the point that the teachers themselves would have to scream several times to get their students’ attention and calm them down. I often wondered how teachers didn’t get hoarse with all the screaming by the end of the day. All admonishments at individual students and the whole class were in loud voices, often screamed and always in Hindi. Only once did I observe an LFP teacher praise a student when she said in English, “Let’s give him a chapatti clap,” and slapped her hands together as if she were making a chapatti. In their ethnographic study of teachers and children living in slum areas in Delhi and attending state-run or low-fee private schools, Rajan and Dalal (2023) comment on teachers’ ‘bourgeois gaze’ in a similar “privileging of violence (in the) everydayness of schooling practices” through corporal punishment and the use of language in their consistent reference to the students as *‘basti ke bachhe’* (children from the slums) whereby “teachers coming with their middle-class sensibilities find the lives of children to be crowded, dirty and unhygienic. Children are constantly reminded of their failing background in the school” (p. 232).

Teachers’ interactions with the students’ families were also quite disrespectful. They often screamed at the parents, particularly when they felt parents were not providing their academically struggling child with the necessary support. The knowledge that most of the parents were illiterate and spoke no English appeared to give the teachers the authority to treat the parents with some disdain about “not caring” for their children. For instance, during an observation of a Saturday remedial lesson, a teacher walked up to the mother of a fourth grader and shouted in Hindi.

He hasn’t shown any progress since the beginning of school! Tell me what I should do! He’s very slow in writing. Now see how long it is taking him to write! You have to speak to him! Why are you not taking responsibility and asking me, ‘what is he learning? How can I help?’ You aren’t showing any interest in his studies! I am trying to help him by giving him the notes, but I can’t give him special attention! I have to help all the children! Why don’t you talk to him?

Interviews with the parents indicated an acute awareness of this status differential along with a recognition that they had little recourse to make changes within their current societal context and their inability to assist their children in their studies because of the language barrier. When asked what they thought of their child’s teacher and how they felt about the teacher shouting at them, all of the parents interviewed said they didn’t like the teachers getting angry with them, but there was nothing they could do about it. As one of the mothers put it, speaking in Hindi:

What can we do? What can we say? We are helpless (*hum majboor hain*). If we shout back at the teacher, she will say, if you don’t like the way I teach, take your son out of the school. I am illiterate. How can I say anything to her?

The pejorative language teachers used to describe the academically struggling students and the oppressive interactions that occurred in the contexts of “linguistic classism” manifest a form of what Samy Alim (2014) calls *raciolinguistics*, whereby language

“serves as a proxy for racism” (p. 18). The teachers employed English as a tool, even a weapon, to exert their authority over their students and their families and establish their caste and class identities.

On the other hand, perhaps because the teachers in the upper and middle-tier schools had the advantages of similar or closer social status with their students and professional development on the latest theories on classroom management, the classroom climate was considerably more easy-going in their classrooms. Although the teachers did shout at the students when the class got noisy and at individual students as well, they did not hit or scream at or publicly shame the students. Only once did I observe a teacher at the middle-tier school threaten to use a ruler: When some of the students called out an answer out of turn, she snapped back, “No answering like that. I’ll pick up the stick.” While firm, they were friendly and willing to laugh with their students, particularly in the upper-tier schools. Since all the students here were comfortable with English, the language in which all these interactions occurred, language did not become an additional mechanism of power between students and teachers, as it did in the LFP schools.

In fact, the students’ facility with English further enhanced this status equilibrium, with students being comfortable correcting teachers and teachers willing to admit their mistakes. In one class in the middle-tier school, when a teacher wrote the question, “who said to who?” on the board, a student pointed out that the second ‘who’ should be ‘whom’. The teacher went back to the board and added the letter M in a different color. “I’ve made an error here,” she announced. “I’ve written it in green, so you know I made an error.” In the post-observation interview, this teacher mentioned that she was trying to introduce the concept of growth mindset and “that it’s okay to make mistakes” to her students she had learnt about in a professional development workshop. Similarly, other upper-tier teachers talked about learning about positive discipline in workshops as an explanation for praising their students, which they did much more frequently. Equally significantly, they intervened when students were mean to each other. When one student snickered at another student’s choice of studying the school anthem during a free period, the teacher immediately responded gently in English, “It’s okay if she wanted to study the school anthem. There’s no need to laugh.”

The previous section demonstrated how formally institutionalized mechanisms perpetuate student and school stratification. In this section, informal mechanisms such as teacher bias become an additional avenue for perpetuating social hierarchies. Within the larger social context in which the teacher is revered as a guru (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2014), but also aware of the tenuous caste/class line separating them from their students and their families, the LFP teachers leveraged their one asset, their greater fluency with English, towards maintaining a “linguistic classism” (Samy Alim, 2014). These teachers are products of the larger, market-driven ideology of low-pay jobs and limited expectations for professional expertise on the one hand, and the social confines

of respectable professions for women and familial expectations on the other (Arvind, 2015; Sriprakash, 2011). As Yengde (2019) asserted:

While the economic system of feudalism has been gradually replaced with a mixed modern-day model of capitalism and state socialism, the social aspect of feudalism is as entrenched as ever. The inherent form of capitalism reproduced with it the age-old structure of oppression. (p. 28)

Avramidis and Norwich (2002) note that teacher attitudes are context dependent, “arising out of interactions with others... and responsive to factors within a particular sociocultural environment” (p. 144). Thus, since the schools, the teachers’ “habitus” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), are imbued with social hierarchies and constructs of caste/class, the teachers’ attitudes reflect both new and old structures of oppression. The LFP teachers sought to distance themselves socially from their students, whom they saw as coming from slum areas, with illiterate and uncaring parents. Although poverty plays a major role in denying them an education, the study found that low-income parents were less likely to question an ineffective education system (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2014) and accepted its indignities and inadequacies of the educational system as they sought to escape poverty. In the process, perceptions of deficit intersect within the social constructs of caste and disability, as the LFP students were rendered “disabled” (Annamma et al., 2018).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The social hierarchies that permeate almost every aspect of Indian life, perpetuated by attitudes towards a multitude of variables, such as caste, gender, and religious difference (Jhingran, 2017; Sharma, 2019; Velaskar, 2015), manifested themselves overtly in the context of caste and class in the schools in this study. As other scholars have shown (Kumar, 2017; Mohan, 2017; Motha, 2014), language and the knowledge of English became another stratifying factor. This hierarchy was less overt in the upper-tier schools because of the equalizing influence of facility in English between teachers and students. Given the already highly stratified nature of Indian society, both formally institutionalized mechanisms, such as the English only policy and the westernized curriculum, as well as those informally sustained, such as teacher biases, combined to perpetuate English as the new caste.

The benevolent intention behind universal access to education has been subverted by neoliberal reforms that focus on productivity and cutting costs, transforming the teaching profession, especially for women (Belliappa, 2014; Manjrekar, 2013). Colliding with age-old societal hierarchical traditions, as more poor children enter schools, the social distance between teachers and students has increased, shaping teachers’ perceptions of their students and their families in LFP schools (Arvind, 2015). Tiers of fluency in English also affected social status, maintaining, for instance, the social class of the upper-tier teachers, which was on par with their students. The difference in the

quality of education that emerges from private schools for affluent students and for low-income, so-called lower caste students points incontrovertibly to an inherent contradiction in the expectation that the private sector, bound as it is by economic constraints of profit, competition and productivity, no matter how philanthropic the enterprise, is the solution to the government's failure (Chattopadhyay & Roy, 2017; Sarangapani & Winch, 2010). The belief everyone will benefit equally merely by making education available to all overlooks the ineluctable fact that school systems reflect the larger global and national influences and participate in the cultural reproduction of existing social and economic hierarchies (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Collin & Apple, 2010).

Efforts to break away from these strangleholds of hierarchy that have become gatekeeping mechanisms for so-called lower caste, regional language-speaking student populations would need to be two-pronged, focusing on both pedagogical practices as well as societal attitudes. The pedagogical practices could reduce some of the inequities within low-fee-paying schools by helping to increase students' access to English without compromising on their multilinguistic abilities. Changes in societal attitudes would help to reduce the vertical hierarchies that constrain access for so-called lower caste students to middle- and upper-tier schools because of their limited knowledge of English, their accents, and their fluency. With English becoming "the new caste", students from lower castes societally who have the added disadvantage of not knowing or speaking English with elite accents or fluency will continue to be excluded and marginalized within the educational system, relegated to the lowest tiers of poor-quality schooling.

5.1 Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Solution

Translanguaging, an approach that has been suggested for truly bilingual speakers (Garcia & Wei, 2014), has potential for applications within classrooms in India by tapping into the multilingual assets of both the teachers and students. In this approach, teachers and students move fluidly between the languages they speak, developing the linguistic and academic foundations for both the mother tongue and the medium of instruction language. For instance, in the example where the student manifested conceptual comprehension when correctly describing the man's actions in the picture the teacher was showing ("he is clothes-washing"), the teacher can acknowledge this understanding and rephrase the answer for grammatical correctness, perhaps by saying, "That is correct. He is washing clothes."

Similarly, for the student who demonstrated understanding of the phonetical sound [b] by offering the word "buthi", the teacher could accept the word and accentuate the beginning sound. Finally, teaching the alphabet and phonic sounds with words like *Indian* and *kabbadi* rather than *igloo* and *kangaroo* also helps to make the curriculum more meaningful and relevant to the students. Making these connections across both languages, Hindi and English, facilitates students' comprehension. Translanguaging is

particularly suited for the Indian context because both teachers and students are bilingual if not multilingual: although the teacher may not necessarily speak the same language as their students, there are sufficient commonalities across the Indian languages that teachers can use these commonalities to make connections as they teach the English language (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2018; Bhattacharya, 2013; Karthik & Noblit, 2020; Mukhopadhyay, 2020). Mukhopadhyay (2020) provides examples of an ESL primary teacher tapping into her students' multilinguistic cultural capital through translanguaging.

Schools can also benefit from moving away from the English only policy. Even in an English medium school, if the students are learning in English at the same time as they are learning English, allowing teachers to leverage the existing multilingualism in the classroom will enable students to learn through whichever language they are more fluent in and gradually acquire the vocabulary of the medium of instruction (Adamson et al., 2024). The translanguaging approach provides opportunities for students to express themselves in the language in which they are most fluent and comfortable so that the medium does not become a barrier to their expression; learning the vocabulary in English for the words that they have a context for and have just expressed themselves in becomes more meaningful than the decontextualized vocabulary in a textbook. Additionally, acknowledging the languages that students bring honors their linguistic diversity and reduces some of the inequities in the hierarchies of language that we currently see occurring in classrooms. Students begin to take pride in being able to speak their own language and maintain the fluency in it even as they begin to acquire fluency in English.

5.2 Breaking Away from English as the New Caste

Caste hierarchies are so entrenched within the Indian psyche that the practice of it is often hardly noticeable in daily life, especially for the privileged groups who benefit from it. Both subtle and overt, these hierarchies abound within the larger social context and are reflected in the schools. The tiered system of the schools is maintained by tuition costs, ensuring which school specific social classes students can attend. Tiers of fluency in English also affected social status, maintaining the social class of the upper-tier teachers which was on par with their students. On the other hand, the teachers in the LFP schools took great pains to distinguish and distance themselves socially from their students, whom they saw as coming from slum areas, and whose parents were illiterate and uncaring. Their knowledge of English gave them the superior status to maintain authoritarian discipline in their classroom. Yet, their own lack of fluency in English created a certain precarity of status that precluded the possibility of admitting to their own mistakes and led to the textbook becoming a higher authority even when it was clearly wrong.

Recent research has begun to reveal these social inequities as they are played out in classrooms (e.g., Rajan & Dalal, 2023). The irony that these inequities occur within a national effort to level the playing field of access to education for all has not been lost. As more and more students who have been historically denied access to education enter schools, teachers are being presented with the challenges of teaching first-generation learners. Age-old instructional practices, curricular material and content, expectations of behavior and established norms are coming under scrutiny regarding their applicability within these new educational spaces and for the new student populations. Questioning these structures is both timely and necessary: expanding access to education to all is rendered meaningless if language as the medium of instruction itself becomes a new gatekeeping mechanism and a further justification for maintaining the power dynamics of social inequity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Kumar, 2021). Research on these inequities also helps to make them more public, creating opportunities for a critical consciousness that can lead to the condemnation of the social injustices embedded in educational systems.

The most challenging yet necessary change lies in shifting societal attitudes. Until anti-casteist attitudes diminish societally, students from so-called lower caste or low-income backgrounds will continue to experience the unfortunate, inequitable consequences of structural hierarchies. However, there is room for optimism. Recent research points to slow but certain change and improvements over the decades for Dalit students from primary to higher education (Kumar, 2021; Kumar & Ahmed, 2013; Rangarajan, et al., 2023). Although students from so-called lower castes and low-income backgrounds may be entering systems that are currently unresponsive to their needs and values, their increased representation over time will inevitably influence curricular content, modify hierarchies of language, and reduce social inequities in classrooms towards improving the quality of education for all. Additionally, teacher training must include language supportive pedagogies, such as translanguaging, as well as curriculum on social justice that enables teachers to recognize and address educational inequities. As Kathik & Noblit (2020) put it, “the success of any language-in-education policy in India will depend on a flexible multilingual approach that recognizes the languages existing in the ecology of children (which will vary from state to state as media of instruction), acknowledges the importance of learning the English language, and ushers in effective pedagogical reforms”.

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