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Author
Friedner, Michele Ilana

Publication Date
2011

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
“Future Life How?”: The Making of Deaf Sociality and Aspiration in Urban India

by

Michele Ilana Friedner

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Joint Doctor of Philosophy
with the University of California, San Francisco

in

Medical Anthropology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Lawrence Cohen, Co-Chair
Professor Sharon Kaufman, Co-Chair
Professor Gillian Hart
Professor Vincanne Adams

Spring 2011
“Future Life How?”: The Making of Deaf Sociality and Aspiration in Urban India

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by Michele Ilana Friedner
Abstract

“How Future Life?”: The Making of Deaf Sociality and Aspiration in Urban India

Michele Ilana Friedner

Joint Doctor of Philosophy with the University of California, San Francisco

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Professor Lawrence Cohen, Co-Chair
Professor Sharon Kaufman, Co-Chair

With the decline of the public sector in India, corporate rationalities have come to play an increasingly important role in everyday life in urban India. In analyzing this trend, this dissertation tracks what possibilities and constraints these new rationalities offer deaf young adults in the spaces that they circulate through. This dissertation argues that vocational training for deaf people is now focused on creating (immobile) workers for the Information Technology sector and that corporate social responsibility initiatives produce new aspirations and sensibilities in both deaf workers and their “normal” co-workers. These work places, however, are not considered to be stable or fulfilling. As ideas and ideals of modernity circulate, and in the absence of state support, pyramid schemes and deaf churches become spaces of aspiration and development. “Deaf development” refers to the emergence of deaf centered structures and institutions that are run according to deaf social practices and norms. This dissertation argues that new deaf worlds are emerging in which political, social, economic, and pastoral desires articulate with each other and cannot be disentangled.

The central thesis is that deaf people create unintended deaf spaces as they circulate through structures and institutions -- educational institutions, vocational training centers, churches, and pyramid scheme recruitment organizations-- that were set up for deaf people but not by them. Deaf young adults, often the majority population at these centers, create dense pedagogical and social communities, or moral worlds, of their own within these spaces in which they patiently and impatiently wait for “deaf development,” pass time, share information and news, and speculate about the future. In creating spaces and socialities, deaf young adults also create deaf selves. As neither the state nor deaf peoples’ families recognize Indian Sign Language, deaf people’s social practices and aspirations are often illegible. Deaf people therefore become oriented towards each other and engage in “sameness work” through which differences are minimized and deaf sociality is created. And as sign language is not just a language-- deaf social practices and aspirations are embedded within its transmission and utilization-- learning sign language means becoming a specific kind of deaf person who becomes oriented towards other deaf people and deaf development.

The first work on urban deaf social formations in India, this dissertation explores both what is distinct about deaf experiences in urban India and how deaf Indians are like
others. In doing so, it analyzes how the categories of “deaf” and “normal” are produced as norms that exist in relation to each other. This dissertation also considers concepts of deaf similitude and asks how desires for and imaginaries of “deaf development” arise in relation to India’s political economic development and the existence of deaf worlds elsewhere. In contrast to anthropological literature that examines how the discourse of development creates new subjectivities based upon feelings of inferiority, lack, and underdevelopment, this dissertation argues that the discourse of “deaf development” creates subjectivities through cultivating aspirations for and imaginaries of a better future. An “ethnography of circulation,” this work analyzes how spaces of circulation are produced in relation to each other, how circulation produces new selves and socialities, and how discourses circulate.
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Common Abbreviations Used

AIISH: All India Institute of Speech and Hearing
ASL: American Sign Language
BDA: Bangalore Deaf Association
BEL: Bharat Electronics Limited
BEML: Bharat Earth Movers Limited
BPO: Business Process Outsourcing
CBR: Community Based Rehabilitation
CCPD: Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disability
CGP: Career Guidance and Placement Office
CII: Confederation of Indian Industries
CSI: Church of South India
CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility
DDBSC: Delhi Deaf Brothers and Sisters Club
DEF: Deaf Education Foundation
DEO: Data Entry Operation
DETC: Deaf Empowerment Training Center
DDWL: Delhi Deaf Women’s League
DPA: Disabled Peoples Association
FICCI: Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry
HAL: Hindustan Aeronautics Limited
HR: Human Resources
IAS: Indian Administrative Service
IDCS: International Deaf Children’s Society
IDSA: India Direct Selling Association
IGNOU: Indira Gandhi National Open University
ISH: Institute for Speech and Hearing
ISL: Indian Sign Language
IDS: Institute for Deaf Studies
IT: Information Technology
ITES: Information Technology Enabled Services
JSSPPH: JSS Polytechnic for the Physically Handicapped
MSJE: Ministry for Social Justice and Empowerment
NASSCOM: National Association of Software and Service Companies
NCDE: National Coalition on Disability and Employment
NCR: National Commonwealth Region
NGO: Non Governmental Organization
NIDA: National Indian Deaf Association
NIHH: National Institute for Hearing Handicapped
PIDL: Pan Indian Deaf League
PM: Prosperity Meeting
PWD: Person with Disability
RCI: Rehabilitation Council of India
SKID: Sheila Kothavala Institute for the Deaf
SMS: Short Message Service
SSLC: Secondary School Leaving Certificate
WHO: World Health Organization
WWD: Worker with Disability
Acknowledgements

Conducting research for and writing this dissertation was an incredibly rich, rewarding, and exciting process. I have my many dear friends, interlocutors, mentors, colleagues, and family to thank for this (and these categories are intermingled). As I have used pseudonyms for all of my interlocutors (many of whom are also dear friends), I cannot mention them by their names. I would especially like to thank the people who I have named Radhika, Chetan, and Sushma for their support with my research, their patience for all of my questions, and the enthusiasm that they too invested into this project. I also thank all of the church communities which I became apart of, the members of Silver Venture for permitting me to attend their meetings and functions, and all of the vocational training centers and sites of employment which generously and graciously permitted me to spend time in their midst. My interlocutors offered me companionship, wonderful conversation, cups of tea, and meals—I thank them for this. I have a special debt to the NGO which I have called the Disabled Peoples Association for permitting me to become a part of the life of their vocational training center.

In Bangalore, I thank Vanita, Joella, and Johnny Thomas for providing me with a beautiful home to live in as well as incredible hospitality and friendship. I also thank Ida, Kezia, and Rebecca Thomas for being the best neighbors ever. Meenu Bhambani also opened her home and life to me while conducting preliminary fieldwork in 2007 and has been an amazing friend, mentor, and guide throughout my fieldwork. Nanda Kishore, Sravanthi Dasari, Lillian D’Costa and Nagaraj P. have also been great friends and occasional partners in crime at times throughout my research. In Delhi, I thank the women (and one man) of the Delhi Deaf Women’s League for always welcoming me with cups of chai, generously shared lunches, and invitations to visit them at home. I also thank all of the students at the new B.A. program in New Delhi, especially the young women, for wonderful conversations and meals. And of course I thank Dharmesh, Vikas/Smile and Atul for putting up with my questions and presence, and permitting me to visit their programs and institutions. In Coimbatore I thank Renuka of the organization that I call the International Fellowship for opening her home to me. Madan Vasishtha at Gallaudet University was very helpful and encouraging at the beginning of this project.

I have been lucky to have a wonderful dissertation committee, “a dream team,” made up of Lawrence Cohen, Sharon Kaufman, Vincanne Adams, and Gillian Hart. I thank them all for their careful reads, pointed questions, and important suggestions. Sharon Kaufman’s Spring 2010 dissertation writing seminar was also incredibly helpful and supportive and I thank its members for their feedback. I also thank Jim Holston for being the chair of my orals committee and for his support of this project. Rahul Bjorn Parson was an amazing Hindi teacher. Susan Burch and Alison Kafer have been mentors and sources of support throughout this project. The Society of Disability Studies (SDS) has been a wonderful intellectual community throughout my academic career. I owe a special and significant debt of gratitude to both Mara Green and Frank Bechter for incredible commentary and suggestions and for always being there to bounce ideas off of. Mara has also been a fabulous editor and I feel very lucky to have her as a colleague and good friend. Satendra Kumar, Meenu Bhambani, Joan Ostrove, Alastair Iles, Vandana Chaudhry, Annelies Kusters, Mike Morgan, Annabelle Heckler, Naomi Baer, Emily Teplin, Lucia Marranis, and Eunjung Kim have read drafts and offered great feedback.
throughout this project—thank you! Mike Morgan provided me with very helpful images. In India, Renu Addlakha, Mary John, and Roma Chatterji have been very responsive and supportive interlocutors. More recently at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stefan Helmreich and Graham Jones have been wonderful to talk to and brainstorm with.

I thank the National Science Foundation, the American Institute of Indian Studies, and the University of California at Berkeley’s Human Rights Center for generous funding. The American Institute of Indian Studies hosted a very generative Junior Fellows conference where I was able to present and receive feedback on my research. In Bangalore, I thank the Institute of Social and Economic Change for serving as my academic host. At UCSF and Berkeley, Ned Garrett, Clair Dunnes, Kimberly Bissell, and Mary Walsh have been extremely helpful and patient at walking me through bureaucratic processes.

I thank my mother, Ann Friedner and sister, Karen Friedner for their support and encouragement in pursuing this work. Karen visited me in India, spent time hanging out at DPA, and bravely accompanied me on interviews on her first day in Bangalore. My now deceased father, Yochanan Friedner, is to be thanked for instilling a sense of curiosity, slight stubbornness, and genuine openness towards new experiences in me. Above all, I thank my partner, Jamie Osborne for all of his support, love, encouragement, and of course the constant rides on Lalitha, our untrustworthy bajaj scooter, to interviews and appointments.
A Note on Concepts Used

“There is no fact which is normal or pathological in itself. An anomaly or a mutation is not in itself pathological. These two express other possible norms of life” (Canguilhem 1989, 144).

DEAF-NORMAL-WHICH?/“Are you deaf or normal?”- the ubiquitous question that deaf people in India ask

Before and during the process of writing this dissertation, I spent much time thinking about appropriate terminology for writing about deaf people in India and about deaf people in general. The field of Deaf Studies has grappled with these issues extensively, most concretely in the debates around writing d/Deaf. These debates have often coalesced around whether deaf should be written with a capital or lower case d/D. Following James Woodward (1972), most Deaf Studies writers choose to write about Deaf people, and not deaf people, as Deaf represents a person or group of people as a member of a linguistic and cultural minority. In contrast, deaf is seen to be a medicalized condition, a disability, and/or an impairment. Most Deaf Studies works focus on a binary between Deaf people and hearing people (e.g., Padden and Humphries 1988, 2006, Lane 1992, Lane et al., 1996) and there are few works that explore the tensions between deaf and Deaf as categories (but see Friedner 2010b). This is a very specific construction of deafness that has been used in the United States to demand political rights and representation (Shapiro 1994). However, the deaf young adults with whom I conducted my research in Bangalore never wrote deaf with a capital D nor did they talk about being a linguistic or cultural minority (unless they had substantial contact with international Deaf visitors)-- although they did talk about having a strong sense of being different from hearing people. My interlocutors also did not talk about deaf and hearing people but rather about what I would translate as deaf and normal people. One was either deaf or normal. Deaf was signed as the internationally common way of signing deaf (see figure one) and normal was signed by opening and closing one’s hand next to one’s ear (see figure two). Most of my interlocutors mouthed or said “deaf(s)” or “normal” in English as they signed the respective signs. In writing text messages or notes, they would often write “deaf(s)” and “normal(s).” In addition, hearing people who spent time with deaf people often spoke or mouthed (while signing) in English of themselves as normal(s) and deaf people did not see this as a problem. I, like many Americans and other Westerners, was initially uncomfortable with this use of terminology and at first I avoided using it. For example, people often asked me if my husband or family members were deaf or normal and I replied “they are hearing” to blank faces.
I quickly came to realize that normal meant normal hearing and that the use of deaf and normal served to create both categories as distinct norms. That is, the category of normals created the category of deafs and vice versa. Through placing normal and deaf in relationship, both are created as distinct ways of being in the world. While this may seem to be an example of Judith Butler’s concept of the “constitutive outside,” I argue that it is not as both deaf and normal can be seen as categories of subject making and both produce certain kinds of subjectivities; neither category exists “outside.” (Butler 1993, 3).

While many reading this text may view the use of the word normal as signifying some internalized oppression or stigma on the part of my interlocutors, I argue that most of my interlocutors were unaware of the normative and often moralistic meanings of the word, which according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means “conforming to a standard; usual, typical, or expected.” In contrast, when I asked my interlocutors what normal meant, they told me that it meant someone who could hear or who was not deaf. While I do not dispute that normal is a category heavy with normative connotations and judgment (e.g., Goffman 1963), understanding how the category of normal operates in general is not my purpose. Rather what is at stake is understanding what is produced when deaf and normal are used as binary, co-constitutive normative categories in specific contexts. How are deaf and normal a productive binary and what does this binary produce?

In the interest of staying close to the words, and hopefully the worlds, of my interlocutors, I use normal and deaf throughout this dissertation. This unmarked or uncontextualized writing of deaf and normal might seem troubling to some readers in its seeming universality in that these are categories used elsewhere and perhaps have different meanings and connotations depending on context. As such, I have thought about italicizing deaf and normal when writing about this specific Indian context in order to mark these as distinct indigenous categories. However, I am uncomfortable doing this lest I create the sense that there is a homogeneous Indian deaf or normal; and so in order to avoid splitting hairs, I am leaving deaf and normal as unmarked. I do not however think that there is a single way to be deaf in the world and I hope that this dissertation makes this clear. In addition, I argue that tensions between specificity and universality animate
this work just as lower case d and capital D d/Deafness exist in tension and in relation with each other (Friedner 2010b).

There are times when I write hearing instead of normal, usually when citing (mostly western) researchers writing about deaf education or interlocutors who specifically use this word. My hope is that through immersing readers in the world of deafs and normals, the ways that both are normative categories will come to the fore. I especially hope that readers will be able to see how talking about, and creating a binary between, deafs and normals is productive of and for deaf sociality.

A Note on People and Places

I use pseudonyms when writing about non-governmental organizations and training centers and the people who run and work at them. I also use pseudonyms for most political/activist organizations and their leaders, schools and other educational institutions (with the exception of the World Federation of the Deaf, National Institute for the Hearing Handicapped, All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, and Indira Gandhi Open University as these are public government institutions), and for all of my interlocutors as well as others who were not direct interlocutors.

A Note on Translation Practices

Sign Language has have no conventionalized or widespread written form. As such, in representing my interlocutors’ words, I use three methods. I provide glosses in which I provide a word for word rendering of sign language without accounting for grammar. Glosses are differentiated from other forms of representation and writing by being in all capital letters. In these glosses I use hyphens to link words that function as phrases together.

In some cases I provide paraphrasing of what my interlocutors said and I differentiate this from a translated quote by writing in italics. I choose to paraphrase in order to make it clear to the reader that sign language is a different language from spoken and written language (in this case, mostly English). I also use paraphrasing at times in order to stress the specificity of the word or phrase being used (as in Introduction II). I contend too that there is an affective dimension to seeing phrases and sentences written in paraphrased sign language word order.

Finally, when I translate my interlocutors’ words from sign language (American Sign Language, varieties of Indian Sign Language, or International Sign) to English and render their words into English grammatical structure, I use quotations and I do not italicize. An example of these glossing, italicizing, and translation practices would be the gloss DEAF DEAF SAME. The gloss can be paraphrased as “deaf deaf same” and translated as “I am deaf, you are deaf, we are the same.”

I also write Hindi or Kannada words in italics using their commonly accepted American English spelling and I provide a translation immediately following the italicized word.
Preface

As a child growing up in almost but not quite suburban Queens, New York, most of my earliest friends were Indian. They were Christians from Kerala and lived in houses scattered a few blocks around my own. In elementary school, we banded together. I was deaf and they were brown; we were thus marked as outsiders by the popular (white and hearing) kids in our classes. They brought me back plastic bangles from their summer trips to India and I ate Indian food at multicultural food events held in my elementary school classrooms. I gawked at their parents in their exotic seeming lungis and salwar kameez outfits while walking around the neighborhood and visiting their houses. Circumstance and geography sparked my early sense of familiarity and connection with India and Indians.

I was interested in India but I was adamantly not interested in deafness. My itinerant hearing teachers, who traveled between various schools and came weekly to take me out of class for auditory training sessions (and towards whom I was often defiant and sullen), often asked me if I wanted them to come to my classes and talk to the other students about my deafness and teach some sign language. They enthusiastically offered to teach sign language songs to my peers and I always immediately refused because I was committed to remaining an oral and speaking deaf person. One particularly motivated teacher recommended that my parents take me to the deaf school in Queens so that I could meet other deaf children. I protested so strongly that my parents did not dare to try. I was determined to pass as hearing and did not want attention to be brought to my deafness. Although I was always the only deaf child in my classes, there were occasionally other deaf children at my school, older or younger than me. We sometimes had sessions with our shared hearing teacher together and she vainly tried to convince us to be friends. None of us were interested. We would see each other in the hallways and when walking to and from school and while we would shoot each other knowing looks, there was no sense of closeness. I didn’t want there to be a sense of closeness as these other deaf children were perhaps too similar to me for comfort.

I remained determined to fit in and uninterested in deafness during my high school years except when I realized that my “difference” could be strategically utilized to help me gain admission to an elite college. I started reading a bit about deaf cultural politics and little d versus big D d/Deafness and I began my college admission essays with the rather strong statement: “I am Deaf with a capital D and proud of it” and then I went on to discuss the stakes of being the only d/Deaf person in large New York City public schools where I, and my parents, often had to fight for seemingly small accommodations such as having my teachers repeat what students in the back of the room said and not talking when facing the blackboard (so that I could read their lips). I wrote about being on the debate team and struggling to understand my opponents. It was very much a narrative of “overcoming deafness” and an informed reader might have sensed the contradictions in the essay. What was I proud of? Being Deaf or overcoming deafness?

I returned to my interest in India at Brown University. The first course I enrolled in at college was Introduction to Indian Religions where Professor Donna Wulff encouraged us to see things differently; she gave us an assignment of looking at the moon when it was full and staring at it until we could see the rabbit in it. She patiently pushed
us to explore things from a different perspective and encouraged us to approach our studies of Indian religions in this way. Entranced, I read texts about Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, and Sikhism. I continued studying in the Religious Studies department and decided that I wanted to study abroad in India in my junior year although I ultimately went to England instead (where I also focused on Indian religions). In college I met other deaf students, volunteered at the Disabled Students Program for a semester, and attended a few sign language classes-- although I dropped out after the instructor told me that she felt sorry for me because I had been mainstreamed.

After I graduated from college, I decided to go to Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. to learn sign language. I thought that I would feel a sense of place or belonging once I arrived. However, I felt alienated. I was told that I was “mentally hearing,” an American Sign Language idiom of sorts, and my sign language teachers, again, told me that they felt sorry for me because I had been brought up in a mainstreamed educational environment. I was kicked out of class for signing and speaking at the same time. My closest friends that summer were hearing-- a labor researcher and a Seventh Day Adventist-- both hoping for new careers working with deaf people. Again, I continued to socialize with hearing people.

My first job after college was teaching ninth, tenth, and twelfth grades at a private hearing high school in Berkeley, California. While I loved teaching a ninth grade World Religions course and the sections of my Diversity Studies course related to disability and deafness, I felt like I was back in elementary school. Students covered their mouths during exams and whispered answers to each other while others rolled their eyes when I asked them to repeat themselves. Frustrated, I left after one year and headed to the disability sector where I worked as an advocate, outreach worker, and (not very good) paralegal at a non-profit disability rights law firm-- Disability Rights Advocates (DRA). I met more deaf people through my outreach work and made deaf friends. As I became familiar with the terrain of deaf advocacy and deaf social networks, I found myself increasingly interested in deaf issues and activism and I realized that they resonated with me. I also became increasingly interested and invested in disability rights and disability politics. I joined the Society for Disability Studies and met disability rights leaders in Berkeley; I had taken a “deaf turn” as I discuss in this dissertation. My parents were happy because they wanted me to go to law school. But I realized that this was not what I wanted and instead I left DRA after two years and traveled finally to India.

Overwhelmed by the prospect of two months of unscheduled travel time, I decided to focus my trip by traveling to and in between deaf organizations and institutions. My then-future husband, Jamie Osborne, accompanied me and as he also worked in the disability sector-- in the area of rehabilitation technology and engineering--we were both interested in learning more about deafness and disability in India. As such, we started our trip by spending time at the Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for Hearing Handicapped (NIHH) in Bombay, India where we would meet people who would later become my interlocutors, mentors, and good friends for this dissertation project. The NIHH campus was a leafy respite from the chaos that greeted our uninitiated senses upon first arriving in India and the deaf students and teachers whom we met were incredibly welcoming, supportive, and helpful. They took us to Chowpatty Beach and introduced us to the proper way to eat dosas and to the Bandra Bandstand where we ate bhel puri for the first time. What was most interesting here, and elsewhere in India, was the sense of
intimacy, affinity, and even familiarity that I felt with the deaf people that we met. Perhaps I was an irresponsible and clueless deaf tourist, engaging in the “deaf tourism” that is becoming commonplace in western deaf circulations, but there was something to be said for feeling a sense of sameness, seemingly so far away from home. And it was this sense of sameness, combined with curiosity about why and how this was the case (and the nagging suspicion and soon to be obvious fact that there were also difference and unequal power relations folded into the mix), that kept me coming back to India, first as a tourist and then as a doctoral student in anthropology.

In his autobiographical work, “The Unheard: A Memoir of Deafness and Africa,” Josh Swiller writes about traveling to a small village in Zambia in order to find a place where deafness does not matter (ostensibly as a result of the category of whiteness overriding the category of deafness). On his personal website where he discusses his book, Swiller writes:

“…as the first white man to ever live in Mununga, I found a place past deafness. The villagers spoke clearly and slowly, looked me in the eye as they spoke so I could read their lips, and there was little or no background noise. They really cared if I could understand them and if I couldn’t, they blamed their English skills instead of my hearing. I was hearing, or about as close as I could get.”

(http://joshswiller.com/?page_id=19).

In contrast, my experience in India was and continues to be marked by feeling like I was in a place where deafness does matter and is always present. The deaf worlds of India have taught me to embrace both the challenges and joys of being deaf in the world. The deaf people with whom I interacted and socialized, first as a tourist and later as a researcher, have taught me the value of “deaf deaf same” or a shared sense of belonging in the world as deaf people. They have taught me that there is something to be said for and about deaf sociality and deaf moral worlds. And unlike in American deaf circles, I was never judged for being raised to be oral (after all, so was almost everyone else in India). I was also not judged for my occasionally stilted sign language (after all, almost everyone else was also learning sign language too). Of course, as a foreign deaf person, I was an outpost of American deaf heaven and my white skin afforded me certain privileges--in the form of more patience awarded to my poor sign language skills--but I would argue that there were not only unequal power relations at play, and that there is something to be said for the powerful affect produced by “deaf deaf same.”

Yes, there is something ironic about the anthropologist who goes in search of sameness instead of difference although I am not trying to universalize one deaf experience or one deaf way of being in the world. I am also not making claims about becoming or going “native.” Rather, I am trying to foreground that it is in India where I felt and continue to feel most in touch with what it means for me to be a deaf person and where my sense of “I am deaf, you are deaf, we are the same” is the strongest. One of my most powerful memories from my fieldwork is standing on a very crowded bus heading to a church on the outskirts of Bangalore. I was traveling with two deaf young men and we were standing towards the back of the very crowded bus, trying to hold onto something to secure ourselves and sign at the same time. There was a young woman, one of many, standing towards the front. She waved to the people I was with and looked at
me and signed: “Are you deaf?” When I signed back that I was, she replied DEAF DEAF SAME or “deaf deaf same” with a broad smile. There is a way that a shared sense of deafness overcomes barriers, at least obvious ones such as communication (and it certainly overcame the communication barriers created by the crowded physical mass of people on the bus). And since communication is perhaps the most key issue for deaf people, ease of communication means a great deal.

India today is constantly changing for deaf people, at least in urban areas, although at times it does not seem like there is any motion. As a result of India’s neo-liberal policies that foster the creation of non-governmental organizations, an active disability services sector (much of it internationally funded) has emerged. There is increased contact between Indian and foreign deaf people; new non-governmental organizations and activist groups are rapidly springing up. There have been rallies held in New Delhi to fight for things such as a new disability law that is more comprehensive in scope, the inclusion of deafness and disability in the eleventh five year plan, and deaf driver licenses. In the spring of 2010, the central government approved the formation of an Indian Sign Language Institute—perhaps a step towards government recognition of sign language. The emergence of the business process outsourcing (BPO) sector has meant new opportunities and constraints for deaf employment and colleges and higher education institutions are opening their doors to deaf people (although there is little or no communication access). My point in mentioning all of this is that India is an incredibly vital and fascinating place to grapple with questions around deafness, politics, language, and the meaning of access. And while I was and am interested in these questions at home too, India is the place where deafness came to personally matter to and for me.

And so what does this all mean now that I am back in the United States? My friends and interlocutors in India often asked me about deaf people in America and whether or not I had deaf friends there. In answering this question, I explained my rather complicated relationship with deafness in the United States. However, I felt uncomfortable about the (contradictory) fact that I circulated mostly in deaf worlds in India and hearing worlds at home. And this contradiction largely remains present—although I now spend more time with deaf people at home in my desire to bridge both worlds. I strongly feel that there is something unique about deaf people and deaf sociality both universally and contingently.
Chapter One: Introduction I & II

Introduction I
“In accordance with postmodernism’s premise that the margins constitute the center, I probe the peripheral so as to view the whole in a fresh way” (Garland Thomson 1997, 5-6).

The Scope of this Dissertation
In this dissertation, I explore what it means for sign language using deaf young adults to circulate through spaces of vocational training, employment, churches and other missionary spaces, and multilevel marketing or pyramid schemes in Bangalore, India. I also look at the emergence of new deaf worlds that are currently forming in New Delhi. I am interested in how deaf socialities and aspirations are created in these spaces as deaf young adults learn from each other, collectively reflect upon what it means to be deaf in India and the world, and imagine what deaf futures might look like in urban centers such as Bangalore and New Delhi. The experience of living in these, and other, urban centers is changing for deaf people. The emergence of neo-liberal political and economic policies means that fewer social and economic protections, social services, and public sector employment opportunities are available. On the other hand, Information Technology and other multinational corporations offer new structures of employment opportunity. The founding of vocational training centers, churches, and pyramid schemes that cater specifically to deaf people offer new forms of social, educational, and economic support as well as new aspirations for the future. Throughout this work, I provide a snapshot of what the stakes of being a deaf young adult in urban India are. I do so in relation to my interlocutors’ narratives of deaf pasts and futures and in relation to the different stakes attributed to being deaf in India as opposed to being deaf in the west.

The needs and desires of sign language using deaf people have largely been invisible to both the state and the public sphere (comprised of people who are not deaf and who do not use sign language). The Indian government has not recognized Indian Sign Language as a real or official language nor has it, or most non-governmental organizations (NGOs), schools, or other institutions in the education or disability service sector, invested resources in developing sign language teaching materials or curricula. India’s landmark legislation on behalf of people with disabilities, the 1995 Persons with Disability (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act does not say anything about sign language. While India’s eleventh five year plan (2007-2012), which outlines government efforts to create economic and social programs and policies, called for the formation of an independent sign language research institute, it is unlikely that such an institute will be developed before the end of the plan period in 2012. In 2007, much to disability activists’ jubilation, India signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Unlike India’s other disability legislation, the UNCRPD stresses the importance of recognizing sign language and promotes the view of deaf people as a linguistic minority. As such, the UNCRPD has provided sign language promoting activists with much hope as well as moral and legal ammunition for developing new laws and policies which recognize and support the use of
sign language. In the meantime, however, deaf people seek out sources of sociality, education, and livelihood that are not always visible to the state.

The illegibility of deaf people is rendered especially visible by the fact that there are no reliable numbers of how many deaf people, sign language-using or not, live in India. The most recent data on deafness is from the eleventh five year plan which states: “As per WHO [World Health Organization] estimates, in India, there are 63 million hearing impaired, with an estimated prevalence as 6.3%. A larger percentage of our population suffers from milder degrees of hearing impairment, adversely affecting productivity, both physical and economic.” (XI Five Year Plan 3.1.180). However, these statistics are based on WHO estimates and not on actual data collection. This data does not tell us degree of hearing loss or numbers of people who are actually deaf. Nor is it clear where these people live—in urban or rural areas—or what they do. As India lacks universal newborn hearing screening, there are no records of the incidence of newborn infants with hearing loss (Nagapoornima et al. 2007). Similarly, when community based rehabilitation (CBR) workers go door to door in both urban and rural areas in search of people who are deaf, they may neither keep records nor share them with the state. It is therefore extremely difficult to get a sense of the geography, prevalence, and incidence of hearing loss in India, let alone of deafness.

This dissertation therefore analyzes practices of sociality making and aspiration by deaf people who are unrecognized, illegible, and uncounted by the state. The central thesis of this work is that deaf people create unintended deaf spaces as they circulate through structures and institutions that were presumably set up for them but not by them. These spaces are recreated as deaf spaces as those who have created them are not aware of the specific needs and desires of deaf people. In this process of creating unintended deaf spaces, my interlocutors also created themselves as deaf people who were members of deaf sociality. I view the creation of spaces and the creation of selves as the same process and project: spaces and selves are created in relation to each other. The second thesis, intimately connected with the first, is that deaf people desire what my interlocutors called DEAF-DEVELOP, or deaf development. According to my interlocutors, deaf development is the development of deaf-centered, and therefore sign language centered, structures and institutions which help deaf people develop language, educational, and moral skills for living in the world as both a member of deaf sociality and part of a larger normal world. Deaf development will result in deaf people becoming equal to normal people. Throughout this dissertation I treat deaf development as both an ethnographic fact and as an analytic.

This work contributes to anthropological literature on development in India in its focus on the emergence of new forms of socialities and aspiration that accompany political economic development. As opposed to anthropological works that examine the way that the discourse of development creates new subjectivities based upon feelings of inferiority, lack, and underdevelopment (e.g., Gupta 1998, Pigg 1992, 2001, Escobar 1995), I argue that for my interlocutors, the discourse of deaf development creates

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1 As I demonstrate in Chapter Three, in many cases vocational training centers were not designed for deaf people but after the decline in polio incidence, administrators needed to increase their student population and so turned to deaf people as the new student population.

2 Unlike other translations from sign language, I do not quote or italicize deaf development because I use it as an analytic (as it converges with ethnographic fact).
subjectivities through the cultivation of aspirations and imaginaries of a better future. In addition, ideas of deaf development also include, and exist in tension with, what Leela Fernandes calls an emerging “culture of consumption” among the new Indian middle class. Many of my interlocutors were either a part of this new middle class or aspired to become a part of it (Fernandes 2000, 89).

Similarly, while recent anthropological works analyze the ways that people develop new understandings of the future or mourn the loss of the future in countries in which the development project has failed (e.g., Ferguson 2006, Guyer 2008, Jeffrey 2010), I argue that my interlocutors are hopeful. Desires for deaf development exist alongside desires for India’s political economic development: as India develops, so will deaf people. According to my interlocutors, just as India is a young nation, struggles for deaf rights are nascent too. A common mantra among deaf and disability activists during my research was that the Indian disability movement was young. India’s disability law had just been signed in 1995. India had ratified the UNCRPD very recently in 2008. New political and educational organizations and structures such as the National Indian Deaf Association (NIDA) and new educational opportunities such as a Bachelor of Arts program in Applied Sign Language Studies have recently emerged (as discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight respectively). And so I contend that the temporality of deaf development is different from normal development, while existing alongside and in relation to it. My interlocutors had a strong sense that deaf development was yet to come.

As the first work to explore the everyday lives of deaf young adults and the emergence of urban deaf social formations in India, this work contributes to anthropological literature on the experiences of people with disabilities and the emergence of disability subjectivity in relation to the changing nature of the state and civil society (Kohrman 2005). There is a growing body of literature that explores the everyday experiences of people with disabilities, much of it anthropological in nature or influenced by anthropological methods (e.g., Ingstad and Whyte 1995, 2007, Kohrman 2005, Das and Addlakha 2001, Livingston 2005). This literature explores the (inter-subjective) life worlds of people with disabilities, often in relation to family, society, and the state, and does not focus exclusively on questions of marginality, poverty, or stigma (see Chapter Two for a more extensive literature review). In contrast, much of what has been written about deafness and disability in India and elsewhere in the developing world tends to follow a formula used by development organizations reporting on the “plight” of people with disabilities (PWD). Such works focus on how PWD are among the poorest of the poor, the most discriminated against, the least likely to be employed, the most affected by harsh neo-liberal economic policies, and the most socially marginalized within families, communities, and other forms of social, political, and economic organizations (e.g., Harriss White and Erb 2002, Rioux and Zubrow 2001, World Bank 2007, Hiranandani and Sonpal 2010, Klasing 2007). While this approach serves as a means of raising awareness, sympathy, and hopefully funds, I argue that in many ways such works serve to further produce PWD as marginalized and peripheral subjects that are in need of social, political, and economic interventions (Butt 2002). These works neglect the everyday experiences and lives of the people that they are purporting to represent and instead depict PWDs in essentialized ways in which they are completely defined by disability.
Yet this is a tricky tightrope to walk as I do not want to, and will not, paint a rosy picture of deaf people in India simply for the sake of talking back to the dominant narratives of poverty and marginalization. This dissertation is therefore attentive of the ways that my interlocutors do feel marginalized and invisible and I attempt to be mindful of the specificities of such feelings. Nevertheless, I argue that there are a few key ways that this dissertation differs from the works mentioned above. First of all, this dissertation is not about disability in general (and many would argue that it is not about disability at all as deaf people often have complicated relationships with the category of disability as I will discuss below) but rather about the specific experiences of deaf young adults. I focus on what is unique about deafness— the use of sign language, particular structures of feeling and belonging, and orientation towards other deaf people. In addition, this dissertation focuses mostly on the experiences of urban lower to upper middle class deaf young adults, experiences which differ from those of rural or urban poor deaf people. And so those expecting to read about the poorest of the poor will be disappointed— although I will discuss the poor conditions of Indian deaf schools, the lack of opportunities available to deaf young adults, and the failure of the state to recognize sign language as I feel that it would be irresponsible of me to ignore these issues.

Interlocutors/Places/Methods

My interlocutors were sign language using deaf people between the ages of approximately eighteen and forty. By most accounts, they were an extremely diverse group. As they had varying exposure to sign language, they often possessed different sign language skill levels. Some of my interlocutors also read lips and spoke while others did not. Some wore hearing aids, depending on financial background, level of hearing loss, and parental rules, while others adamantly refused to wear them. Most of my interlocutors were from the lower to upper middle class although I also interacted with some extremely poor and other extremely wealthy deafs and their families. In addition, my interlocutors were from a wide variety of caste and religious backgrounds. Most of my interlocutors had finished class ten and were enrolled in, or had completed, some form of higher education. I interacted with both young men and women in most spaces with the exception of certain computer training courses and business process outsourcing (BPO) work sites in which mostly young men were to be found. What united my interlocutors was the fact that they were from the same age group, they desired communication in sign language, and they aspired for deaf development.

This research mostly took place in Bangalore and New Delhi. However, as deaf young adults are mobile and travel for educational, social, and employment opportunities, I also traveled as well. In my efforts to understand my interlocutors’ educational histories and backgrounds, I spent time at JSS Polytechnic for the Physically Handicapped (JSSPPH) in Mysore, Karnataka and at various primary and secondary schools and colleges in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. I also traveled to Coimbatore and Erode in Tamil Nadu and Bombay and Pune in Maharashtra in order to examine the emergence of new educational programs and employment opportunities for deaf young adults. This dissertation is therefore an “ethnography of circulation,” to use Arjun Appadurai’s (2001) concept. Appadurai stresses the importance of shifting our analytical gaze from “an ethnography of locations to one of circulations” (Appadurai 2001, 25). As an ethnographer, I circulated, and I see circulation as a central part of my methodology. I
also paid close attention to how spaces of circulation exist in relation to, and intersect with, each other. In addition to circulations between spaces, I also tracked how global discourses around deafness (“global Deafness”) and imaginaries of deaf heavens and hells circulated and were used by my interlocutors. (Friedner 2008, 2010a, Kim 2011). In tracking these discourses, I analyze how they were used to create new spaces.

Following this introductory chapter, the first five chapters of this dissertation are each focused on specific spaces within which deaf people circulate. There is a temporal order of sorts. Chapter Two begins with the family as this is the first space that deaf children inhabit. This chapter includes background on the specific stakes of childhood and educational experiences for deaf people. Chapter Three explores the vocational training centers that deafs gravitate towards after finishing secondary school and analyzes how deaf young adults recreate these training centers as deaf spaces in which deaf selves are produced. Chapter Four examines the employment sites where deaf young adults are produced as deaf groups by employers, paying particular attention to the possibilities and constraints offered by the new Information Technology sector. Chapter Five discusses the many churches in Bangalore through which deaf young adults circulated and analyzes how this circulation provides attendees with a new authoritative discourse with which to think about sign language and deaf sociality. Chapter Six focuses on pyramid schemes that deaf people join and analyzes what new forms of sociality and aspiration emerge through partaking in these schemes. Chapters Seven and Eight explore the emergence of two new deaf worlds in New Delhi, worlds that have social, economic, political, and pastoral stakes. In both of these chapters, I analyze the specific organizational structures and what kinds of aspirations for the future each world offers. One world emerges from the articulation of Christianity and contentious politics and the other emerges from domestic and international educational institutions that advocate for new educational structures for deaf people.

In each chapter I outline the history of deaf people within each space. I analyze how deaf people use these spaces and create them as spaces of deaf sociality and aspiration, also creating new senses of self in the process. I explore the dynamics between deaf people as well as the dynamics between deafs and normals within these spaces. In each chapter, I track the emergence of deaf sociality and negotiations that deaf people must engage in: negotiations over trying to learn sign language, English, academic subjects, or vocational skills in spite of structural obstacles, negotiations over being produced as a deaf group, negotiations over class, caste, and religious differences, and negotiations over competing desires and future aspirations. In these chapters, I also track tensions: tensions around waiting and patience as (un)virtuous orientations, around needing to adjust and manage expectations of other deaf people and the wider normal world, and around desiring both material goods and deaf development.

I want to note that while I have organized my dissertation chapters into discussions about distinct spaces and worlds, I see these spaces and worlds as articulating with, and existing in relation to, each other. That is, deaf young adults often go back and forth between vocational training programs and sites of employment and many will simultaneously attend training programs and work. Similarly, family members will occasionally visit vocational training centers and churches in order to see what happens in these spaces; the space of the family intersects with these other two spaces. This is therefore an attention to circulations that is also mindful of how spaces of circulations
often exist in relation to each other. Here I draw inspiration from Doreen Massey (1994, 2005) who writes about the ways that spaces are constructed out of social relations: “the spatial is social relations ‘stretched out’” (Massey 1994, 2). Massey also entreats us to see space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far and places as collections of these stories within a temporal moment. Spaces, and places, are not static and passive receptacles but they are actively produced and open processes that can be seen as temporary spatial-temporal events (Massey 2005, 130-131). I see the spaces that I am writing about, the spaces that deaf people circulate through, as created through social, political, and economic relationships. Indeed, deaf people circulate through these spaces with other deaf people. As Jamie, one of my interlocutors, pointed out to me: “The deaf world in Bangalore is very small.” What Jamie meant was that deaf people will spend Monday to Saturday together at vocational training programs and then they will see each other again on Sunday at either church or a pyramid scheme informational meeting or both. In circulating together and sharing these experiences, deafs are creating spaces and selves.

Fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted during the summers of 2006 and 2007 and for a period of thirteen months from August 2008 until September 2009. I also returned for a short visit in January of 2010. The majority of my research was conducted through engaging in participant-observation. I spent time with deaf young adults and I participated in whatever it was that they were doing: talking, typing, praying, learning sign language and English, shopping, and waiting for something to happen. I also conducted unstructured interviews with deaf young adults, their families, government officials, NGO administrators, and employers. Finally, I conducted archival research in order to understand what has been written in the media about deafness since the early 1970s until the present. The main languages used during my research were Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language and English and I occasionally employed translators for translation from spoken Kannada, Urdu, Tamil, and Telugu into English during interviews.

Articulations, Not Identity

In her 2005 book, “Deaf in Japan,” Karen Nakamura writes about the ways that deafness is a “hybrid and intersectional identity.” She writes: “You are what you are—Japanese, a Christian, a painter, photographer, architect—but the language barrier puts you out of the mainstream of all these categories” (Nakamura 2005, 11). While Nakamura makes an important point about how deafness intersects with other ways of being in the world, I argue that she does not go far enough. That is, I argue that deafness remakes and redefines what these other categories actually are. My dissertation aims to show what is at stake for a deaf Indian, a deaf vocational training student, a deaf Christian, a deaf business process outsourcing (BPO) worker, and a deaf participant in multi-level marketing schemes. I argue that what is at stake may be different than what is at stake for hearing people occupying these categories because of the use of sign language, structural conditions which foreclose access, and the logics and practices which accompany deaf sociality.

3 Jamie pointed this out to me when I commented on the fact that many deaf people did not seem to mind spending time with other deaf people who had spread rumors about them or otherwise hurt them. Jamie’s point was that the deaf world in Bangalore was very small and so deaf people had to work hard to maintain harmonious social relations because they constantly interacted with the same people again and again.
These seemingly fixed categories-- being Indian, a vocational training student, a Christian, a BPO worker, or a participant in multi-level marketing schemes-- come to take on other meanings. I argue that these categories are reinvented and remade by deaf people as they inhabit them because of their use of sign language and specific deaf structures of belonging and sociality. Furthermore, I argue, following Stuart Hall (1985), that these categories must be seen as overlapping and contingent. Hall’s statement: “But, there is no essential, unitary ‘I’—only the fragmentary, contradictory subject I become” is a beautiful and powerful testimony to the highly contingent and always changing process of becoming (Hall 1985, 109). The deaf young adults with whom I worked were deaf, church-goers, Hindus, vocational training students, pyramid scheme members, teachers, and employees-- multiple categories were occupied at once. And as these categories articulated with deaf ontologies and practices, they became something else.

Yet, in contrast to Nakamura’s (2005) work and works in Deaf Studies which focus on questions of deaf identity making and the politics associated with it (e.g., Breivik 2005, Leigh 2009, Lane et al 1996), a focus on identity is not this dissertation’s contribution. Rather, I purposely do not use the analytical category of identity as I believe that it perpetuates a form of both analytical and ontological violence by “fixing” people in space, time, and place. (Haraway 1991). I argue throughout this dissertation that my interlocutors must engage in sameness work or the cultivation and foregrounding of a shared experience of deafness across (class, caste, geographic, and educational) differences in order to productively work and spend time together. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, sameness work is a process that can be ambivalent and fraught for those engaging in it. And as opposed to the fixed category of identity, this dissertation is more concerned with the fluidity and the constraints of circulations. I ask: What kinds of spaces and selves do these circulations produce? Where do deaf young adults go in search of deaf development? What are the relationships between these spaces, deaf sociality, and deaf development? In returning to the ways that deafness intersects with other ways of being in the world, what new forms of being and belonging emerge?

Why Bangalore?

Bangalore, located in the southern state of Karnataka, is India’s fifth most populous city. It was once known as a sleepy tree- and bungalow- lined “garden city,” a colonial outpost where British military officers and expatriates settled, and a pleasant place for Indian retirees to spend their last years. However, it has been remade as India’s “Silicon Valley,” a cosmopolitan “technopolis” to which highly educated Indian migrants and foreign engineers gravitate for work. According to Michael Goldman (2010), “Until the IT explosion of the 1990s, Bangalore was a comfortable middle-class town with secure union jobs in large public-sector research and manufacturing firms that fed into the high-end functions of the Indian state and economy (e.g. radar and satellite systems, telecommunications and space research, manufacturing equipment)” (Goldman 2010, 4). Bangalore was home to large government employers, many of which began in the early 1900s, such as Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL), Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), and Bharat Heavy Electricals, Limited (BHEL). These industries combined with the existence of top science institutes produced the initial wave of India’s Information Technology revolution in the 1950s (ibid).
The second, or current wave of Bangalore’s IT boom, was produced “when firms such as Texas Instruments asked for substantial upgrading of Bangalore’s pleasant but smalltown public facilities in order to survive in the fiercely competitive global IT sector” (ibid). Goldman points out that India’s IT boom was born out of the conjuncture created by the 1991 world economic crisis which resulted in India’s financial liberalization and western corporations’ anxieties about the upcoming Y2K computer crisis. Once Indian engineers realized that the technology work required was simple and repetitive, they also realized that they could set up corporate structures in India to do this work for a fraction of the cost (ibid). As a result of this realization, firms quickly sprung up in Bangalore and a global shift occurred. The emergence of these corporations has led to the remaking of the city as corporations come to play a large role in political and civic life.

As a result of India’s 1991 financial crisis and its aftermath, Bangalore, and the state of Karnataka more broadly, has been the site of much neo-liberal state contraction and reforms which have led to the emergence of ever ubiquitous public-private partnerships (Nair 2005, Goldman 2010). According to Goldman, parastatal institutions, backed by International Finance Institutions, are remaking government on all levels including state, municipal, and village levels as they develop new forms of governance in their attempts to create Bangalore as a “world city” (Goldman 2010). I argue that these changes have also been remaking the field of vocational training and the structure of employment opportunities available to deaf young adults-- especially as government industries shrink and there are fewer jobs to be found in the public sector. Corporations have increasingly funded vocational training programs, specifically those focusing on computer skills, encouraged their workers to volunteer at these programs on weekends or during work hours as part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) based mandatory volunteering programs, and provided deaf people with jobs.

The political atmosphere around deafness and disability in Bangalore is quite convivial. While Karnataka has what many disability activists consider to be a progressive and approachable disability commission, there has been very little public agitation or change. All of the NGOs with which I worked during my fieldwork were interested purely in providing technical training although they also paid lip service to the importance of empowerment and independence, concepts which I was told were important to funders. There were no deaf or disability focused NGOs in Bangalore with the aim of challenging the state or engaging in contentious politics (as opposed to Delhi or Chennai which possessed such organizations). Rather than engaging in political activism, deaf people in Bangalore circulated between churches, pyramid scheme information sessions, and informal social gatherings.

This lack of contentious politics became obvious to me in December of 2010 when the National Indian Deaf Association (NIDA) called deaf people from all over India via text messages, YouTube videos, and word of mouth to India Gate in New Delhi.

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4 David Harvey (1989) calls such public-private partnerships “urban entrepreneurialism” and he points out that urban governments often play direct roles in the creation of new enterprises, even bearing the risk of these new projects while the private sphere receives most of the benefit (Harvey 1989, 4).

5 According to Achille Mbembe (1992), conviviality is characterized by accommodation, acquiescence, and a general lack of contentious politics.

6 Deaf people in Bangalore themselves created a binary or opposition between engaging in contentious politics and attending churches, pyramid scheme meetings, and informal social gatherings.
for International Disability Day to protest the national government’s failure to implement the eleventh five year plan. Very few deaf people from Bangalore were interested in going although one of my interlocutors told me that he wanted to go as he felt that it was important. He contrasted this event to International Disability Day events in Bangalore which consisted of dance and drama performances by disabled performers held at a government organized public venue. Government ministers made speeches and afterwards attendees were provided with buns and juice. There were rarely interpreters at these events and deaf people went primarily to meet their friends and take advantage of a day off from their training programs or schools. While deaf people often complained to me, and to each other, that these events were inaccessible and irrelevant, they continued to attend them.

I decided to conduct my fieldwork in Bangalore after a preliminary visit in 2005. During this visit I was struck by how deaf people in Bangalore were struggling with the changing face of employment, their relationship to other deaf people both in India and elsewhere, and their sense that Bangalore was an exceptional place in the possibilities and constraints that it offered for deaf employment, sociality, and ultimately, for deaf development. I was also interested in the fact that Bangalore deaf had complicated relationships with deaf Indians elsewhere because deaf people living in Bangalore do not use the same Indian Sign Language that is used in other Indian cities-- although linguists have argued that the grammar is the same throughout urban areas of India with variations in lexicon (Vasishta et al, 1985). It is widely acknowledged that Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language borrows heavily from American Sign Language (ASL) (Johnson and Johnson 2008). In addition, the variety/ies used in other major cities, including Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, and Hyderabad are based upon a variety of sign language that has become standardized through the efforts of teachers and researchers at the National Institute of Hearing Handicapped (NIHH) in Bombay and other institutions around India.

According to most of my interlocutors who were old enough to remember, Bangalore’s particular form of sign language can be traced to the 1970s when a normal, but ASL-signing, Canadian priest, Father Harry, came to India to work with the deaf. He settled in Bangalore and worked with deaf children and young adults to improve educational access and develop a deaf vocational training center. According to most of the deaf people who interacted with him, learning ASL was a transformative event. As Chetan, one of my interlocutors, told me: “Before Father Harry came, I didn’t know the signs for so many words. I didn’t know the signs for days of the week, for emotions and feelings, I could not express myself. Then he [Father Harry] taught me these signs.” Other interlocutors remembered Father Harry’s enthusiasm for teaching sign language songs and drama and many were members of a traveling drama troupe that he established. In an article describing Father Harry’s work published in the now defunct

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Note that “Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language” is not what most deaf people in Bangalore call their sign language. They call it ASL although while Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language uses the ASL fingerspelling alphabet and there are some lexical similarities, the grammar and most of the lexicon is different from ASL. While there has been little linguistic research on Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language, I have had extensive conversations with Madan Vasishta, Samar Sinha, Sibaji Panda, and Michael Morgan, linguists working in the field of Indian Sign Language about the differences between Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language and other sign languages. These researchers agree on the close lexical relationship between Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language and American Sign Language.
newspaper the Universe in 1979 (and republished in “deaf news”, a Bangalore based deaf newspaper, on May 17, 1985), Father Harry talks about how deaf people were “dependent on a natural sign language” prior to his arrival. According to Father Harry, deaf people in Bangalore did not have a developed sign language before he arrived.  

Today most deaf people in Bangalore use the ASL alphabet or “one handed alphabet” for fingerspelling although, as I noted above, the sign language that is used is not ASL despite exhibiting some lexical similarity. This “one handed alphabet” is different from the “two handed alphabet” (related to the British Sign Language alphabet) that most Indian Sign Language users in other cities use. Deaf people in Bangalore are aware that their sign language is different from other varieties of Indian Sign Language and this difference is often stressed. When I asked deaf people in Bangalore why they did not want to change their use of sign language to be like the rest of India, I was told again and again: “This is our language. Why should we change to be like Bombay?” The reference to Bombay specifically derives from the fact that the first Indian Sign Language training and research program at the NIHH (to be discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight) was established in Bombay. Sign language teachers from Bangalore have traveled to Bombay to learn ISL and methods for teaching it. However, once they returned to Bangalore, they did not teach ISL but rather Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language.

When watching sign language classes in Bangalore, it was often unclear to me which sign language was being taught-- ASL? ISL? Something that the teachers themselves developed?-- as despite ongoing efforts by a few NGOs to create them, there were no Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language dictionaries. Sign language teachers in Bangalore utilized both ASL and ISL dictionaries while teaching and they switched between the two.

It also seemed to me that Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language was always changing. As deafs from other parts of India traveled to Bangalore for education and employment, Bangalore deaf learned more standardized ISL; in their desire to communicate with their new friends and co-workers, they changed how they signed. And as I will discuss in Chapter Seven, deaf teachers from Bombay traveled to Bangalore to teach both English and sign language to deaf young adults in Bangalore; students of these teachers invariably learned the dominant standardized mode of ISL used elsewhere. Very often I noticed ISL and ASL signs used in tandem and there was little or no distinction made between the two. It always seemed to me that in Bangalore, institutions teaching sign language and deaf people themselves were less concerned with which sign language they were teaching and learning and the politics around one sign language in relation to

8 The veracity of this statement is unknown. Older deaf people told me that they knew and used sign language prior to Father Harry’s arrival and another (deaf) Canadian missionary who traveled to Bangalore in the 1970s told me that the deaf people with whom he worked had their “own” sign language which was not ASL. It is likely that some people used a shared sign language, while others did not, and it is also possible that some who had previously used their “own” sign language came to see it as something other than language.

9 There has been no formal linguistic research conducted on sign language in Bangalore in the past twenty years. The field of sign language linguistics in India is extremely new and has mostly been concerned with establishing Indian Sign Language as a legitimate language.

10 Note that both one handed and two handed sign language alphabets, indeed all of the sign language alphabets used in India, are based on English language letters. Movements to establish vernacular sign language alphabets have never taken off. This was attempted in Delhi in the 1960s and in Bangalore more recently but has lacked popular support.
another than with actually communicating. That is, there was little boundary work around what was or was not Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language.

But Bangalore is the one place in India where deaf people use one-handed sign language. This statement was repeated again and again by deaf people in other parts of India to illustrate how Bangalore deaf were “different,” “more proud,” and how “they don’t want to be like us.” Bangalore deaf, at least in their use of sign language, were seen to be exceptional. Bangalore was also special because it was supposed to have one of the best deaf schools in India, the Sheila Kothavala Institute for the Deaf (SKID); it was the home of once strong government industries and factories where deaf people were previously able to find comfortable and secure jobs working as welders, electricians, watch assemblers, and clerks; and over the last ten years, the Information Technology (IT) sector emerged and many deaf people found jobs as data entry operators or account specialists in outsourced business processes. Educated deaf young adults from all over India flocked to Bangalore in order to attend training programs that trained them for and connected them with these jobs (see Chapters Three and Four).

It is for all of these reasons: Bangalore’s apparent deaf exceptionalism, its emergence as a model of neo-liberal economic and political development, its new structures of training and employment emerging as a result of the corporatization of everyday life and politics, and its lack of contentious deaf and disability politics, that I decided to conduct my fieldwork in Bangalore. I did not want to study a traditional social movement based on contentious politics and making claims against the state because I was interested in focusing on how people lived their everyday lives and what everyday experience was like for my interlocutors (Das and Addlakha 2001). At the same time, I was interested in understanding the stakes of India’s neo-liberal economic and social
policies for deaf people’s everyday lives. Bangalore therefore seemed an ideal place to situate this research.

**Deaf People, Everyone Else, and the State**

When I showed early drafts of dissertation chapters to colleagues and committee members, I was asked: “What is so unique about the experiences of deaf young adults? They seem like everyone else in India who has had a poor education and who are currently looking for employment.” and “They seem so normal, just like everyone else!” I argue that there is something unique about the experiences of deaf young adults— again, connected to sign language use, structures of feeling and belonging and orientation towards other deaf people— and I hope to show this uniqueness. My interlocutors often told me that they felt unique: they felt that normal people did not understand what was important to deaf people and that deaf people were misunderstood, both literally and figuratively. On the other hand, I do not wish to render my research subjects too unique, too much of the exception rather than the norm, too peripheral.

Instead, I draw inspiration from the quote by Rosemarie Garland Thomson that I started this introduction with. That is, I am interested in what the experiences of deaf young adults in India can teach us about what is happening in India in the current moment and what their experiences can tell us about what it means to be Indian. As such, I hope to avoid this dissertation being seen as a narrow and overly focused work with no relevance for people who are uninterested in the experience of deafness in urban India. I argue that the experiences of deaf people are both peripheral and central experiences. Deaf people, despite often having different orientations, perspectives, and desires, also struggle with the same aspirations and desires that normal people struggle with. I want to stress that while my interlocutors had seemingly normal desires for things such as good quality education, meaningful work, moral development, and consumption of material goods and experiences, barriers were all the more significant due to structural conditions which prevented communication from being taken for granted.

Deaf people often had complicated relationships with the state and with what it meant to be Indian since they were not provided with the tools and information that they needed to participate in official public spheres. Most of my interlocutors did not directly invoke Indian-ness except when discussing what they considered to be “Indian culture” which was always defined in opposition to “western culture” or “American culture,” or when discussing Indian “backwardness” in relation to the west— usually in terms of the status of deaf people. My interlocutors also mentioned the government and its failure to appropriately fulfill their needs and desires although they never specified which part of the government, which office, or which official. While the government was always an abstract entity very much out of reach, their exposure to it consisted of the medical offices where deafs went to get their disability certifications, the Karnataka State Disability Commission where deafs occasionally went for job help, and the occasional (uninterpreted) National Flag Day celebration that deafs attended. While the Bangalore Deaf Association hosted events for national holidays, the space provided for these holidays was often used to discuss and debate news and issues perceived to be more relevant to deaf people.

Due to communication barriers, most of my interlocutors were unaware of local, state level, or national politics and, as a result of poor educational communication access,
only a few were able to mention national hagiographic figures such as Mahatma Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru by name. Very few of my interlocutors voted and those that did usually voted for politicians favored by their families—many deafs told me that their parents would accompany them to the voting booth and point to the name on the ballot—although a few surreptitiously went against their parents’ wishes. Vocational training programs often had courses on civic history and general knowledge, which included information about India such as geography, government offices, government industries, and history, but these courses were not taught in sign language and as a result most deaf young adults did not learn very much.

This was perhaps not always the case. The Pan Indian Deaf League (PIDL) in New Delhi has prided itself on its close ties to the national government throughout the years and its older members deeply revered political figures such as V.V. Giri and Indira Gandhi who they say “loved deaf people” (see Chapter Seven). The PIDL offices are lined with photos of older deaf leaders with Indian politicians. In contrast, the younger generation does not have this sense of attachment. Recently, in order to increase deaf peoples’ knowledge about the responsibilities of the government, the newly formed National Indian Deaf Association’s (NIDA) board members were involved in a study of the structure of the government in which they examined official government documents and analyzed the responsibilities of the different ministries and offices. This was done with the hope of holding the government accountable for improving access for deaf people. To this end, the NIDA also holds rallies and demonstrations often in coordination with the Disability Rights Group, a consortium of disability groups in Delhi (also see Chapter Seven). The NIDA is attempting to create a more familiar idea of the state which deaf people can confront in order to demand rights.

The State, the Global, and Global Deafness

Predicated by the foreign exchange crisis in 1991, the Indian economy opened up to foreign capital and the market became increasingly dominant, in contrast to India’s earlier developmental and welfare based policies. With the emergence of neo-liberal economic policies and the opening of India to foreign capital, the identity and direction of the Indian state, previously identified as a developmental or welfare state with a focus on national industries and poverty alleviation, became less clear (Ray and Katzenstein 2005, Gupta and Sharma 2006, Deshpande 1998). While Bangalore exists as an (extreme) case study of how India has been transforming over the last two decades, my interlocutors may also be (extreme) case studies of Indians’ changing relationship with the state; they depend less on the state for education, employment, and personal development and instead turn to NGOs, multinational corporations, and other internationally funded organizations such as churches.

While these institutions, NGOs, and international deaf activists may put forth ideas of horizontal networking (Appadurai 2001), such a focus on the horizontal and the fetishizing of sameness serves to obscure power differentials. As I have argued elsewhere (2008, 2010a), internationally funded NGOs often promote an idea of “global Deafness,” which I have defined as a normative set of understandings about (capital D) Deafness that emerge through the practices of international rehabilitation institutions, activists, and

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11 V.V. Giri was India’s president from 1969-1974. Indira Gandhi was India’s prime minister from 1966 to 1977 and then from 1980 until 1984.
organizations. These practices disseminate a specific concept of Deafness based upon ideas of a universal Deaf culture and community and the importance of seeing Deaf people as a linguistic minority group with rights. “Global Deafness” therefore can be seen to function as a hegemonic concept that usurps the specific realities of everyday deaf lives.

However, as Lisa Rofel (2007) points out in her work on gay identity in China, it is important to be attentive to the ways that seemingly universal concepts such as “gay” articulate with what happens on the ground and are perhaps transformed and remade. Rofel argues that anthropologists must be attentive to articulations and contingencies instead of focusing so heavily on a neat binary of sameness and difference; anthropologists must analyze how and why certain discourses are picked up and adapted by local actors—if they in fact are. In taking Rofel’s point to heart, I argue similarly that this research must look at what happens when “global Deafness” articulates with everyday deaf life in urban India. What is it is about “global Deafness” as a concept that may or may not be compelling to my interlocutors? However, while Rofel exhorts us to avoid focusing on, and perhaps trafficking in, tropes of sameness and difference, I am reminded of James Ferguson’s statement regarding African children who, through writing tragic letters, make demands upon the west. As Ferguson writes:

> Claims of likeness, in this context, constitute not a copying, but a shadowing, even a haunting—a declaration of comparability, an aspiration to membership and inclusion in the world, and sometimes also an assertion of responsibility
> (Ferguson 2006, 17).

It is important to examine what claims of sameness produce on the ground. What does “global Deafness” do for deaf young Indians living in urban areas? Similarly, what do interactions with Deaf foreigners and exposure to international deaf and hearing worlds mean for my interlocutors’ understandings of the stakes of being deaf and being Indian? I argue that the presence of something called the global in urban India creates new understandings of deafness as well as new ideas and imaginaries of progress and development—although these understandings and ideas are often different than what proponents of “global Deafness” may advocate for. The global, and “global Deafness” in particular, therefore lurks within this dissertation.

**Deafness and Sound/Silence**

While writing this dissertation, members of my writing group at the University of California at San Francisco asked me about what the experience of silence was like for my interlocutors. Similarly, when trying to decide on a title for this work, many people

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12 There is an unasked question that lurks throughout this dissertation: what sense of responsibility do international deaf visitors feel towards the deaf Indians whom they encounter?
13 Tom Boellstorff (2005), writing about homosexuality in Indonesia, writes: “Similitude is the ultimate challenge both homosexuality and globalization pose to social theory; in both cases we appear to be confronted with “a desire for the same” (Boellstorff 2005, 26). Boellstorff pushes anthropologists to examine how the categories of sameness and difference might no longer be appropriate ones for understanding experiences that are increasingly global. Following Boellstorff and Rofel, I do not see sameness and difference as having analytical weight as concepts; I am more interested in what kinds of affects, dispositions, and discourses these concepts produce for my interlocutors.
suggested that I include the words “sound,” “silence,” or “voice” in the title. Indeed, many works on deafness and deaf people, from a wide variety of disciplines including Deaf Studies, Anthropology, Philosophy, History, and Cognitive Science, do include such language in their titles (Neisser 1990, Ree 1999, Plann 1997, Preston 1998, Sacks 1990, Padden and Humphries 1988). However, I argue that such a focus (and such language) does not reflect deaf peoples’ “center” or orientation (Padden and Humphries 1988). Most of my interlocutors were simply not interested in or oriented towards sound although, as I noted, quite a few did use hearing aids and benefited from using them.

The binary between sound and silence or voice and sign did not come up for most deaf young adults in their everyday lives. I contend that this fascination with such binaries is a hearing fascination and one that does not enter into deaf peoples’ understanding of their experiences. Hearing aid technology is improving and cochlear implants are becoming more common in India and elsewhere. However, most of my interlocutors were not interested in the former and were often repulsed by the idea of the latter. As such, this dissertation does not deal with the binaries between sound and silence or voice and sign nor do I look at deafness as a medical condition that can be ameliorated through the use of hearing aids or cochlear implants. In focusing specifically on desiring sign language and the role that sign language plays in sociality formation, I foreground the desires and perspectives of my interlocutors (which differ from what might be imagined by well meaning rehabilitation workers, policy makers, and hearing people in general).

Deafness and Disability

Returning to the specificity of deafness in relation to disability: in the west, Deaf people and disabled people and Disability Studies and Deaf Studies have existed in an often tense and uneasy relationship with each other. As I discuss elsewhere in this dissertation and in other publications (2008, 2010a, 2010b), deaf people may or may not identify as disabled and while they often benefit from international, national, and local disability laws, they often prefer to identify themselves as a linguistic or cultural minority group akin to other such groups. In the United States, disability movements have modeled themselves after deaf movements because deaf people have been extremely successful at representing themselves as a minority group with their own distinct culture. In contrast, deaf people have kept their distance from the disability movement (Shapiro 1994, Burch and Kafer 2010). Susan Burch and Alison Kafer’s (2010) edited volume “Deaf and Disability Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives” does an excellent job of comparing and contrasting the intellectual and political aims of Deaf Studies and Disability Studies and shows how the two are sometimes estranged bedfellows due to deaf peoples’ ambivalent relationship towards disability as a category of affiliation.

Deaf people in India for the most part do not consider themselves to be part of a disability group and they often do not participate in wider disability movements or protests (although deaf people do attend International Disability Day festivities which are cross-disability in nature). In some cases, the reason for the lack of affiliation is simple: deaf people do not have communication access at cross-disability events and most disabled people do not know sign language. I have examples from my research of disability leaders dismissing deaf people as uninterested in participating in a broader disability movement-- although these leaders miss the fact that communication access is
not provided within the movement. However, and contrary to this lack of awareness, I also have encountered disabled people who have learned sign language in order to communicate with deaf people and act as interpreters at both schools and workplaces. When I asked deaf people about these relationships with disabled people who signed, they acknowledged feelings of affinity but were always quick to distinguish between “deaf” and “handicapped;” these were seen as two distinct categories and ways of being in the world. It is for these reasons that I am reluctant to claim that this is a dissertation about disability in India-- although I draw inspiration from Disability Studies and the work that it does to ask critical questions about normality, deviance, bodily function and the relationship between medical and social knowledge (e.g., Davis 1997).

Deafness in India and Deaf Studies

This dissertation also has an ambivalent relationship to Deaf Studies literature, almost all of which has developed in the west, specifically in the United States. Deaf Studies literature has been extremely productive in showing how deaf people have a “different center” which is based on shared use of sign language (Padden and Humphries 1988). This literature generally argues that deaf people are “people of the eye,” a rich linguistic and cultural minority, and are not disabled (Lane et al. 1996, Lane 1992). However, the current canon of Deaf Studies (e.g., Lane et al. 1996, Ladd 2003, Padden and Humphries 2006) privileges a uniform and homogenous Deaf identity that is unfettered by the trappings of place and space; not coincidentally, the majority (if not all) of this work is situated in the global north and tends to ignore the experiences and life worlds of those residing elsewhere. Deaf Studies works tend to promote the notion that deaf people are more interested in “routes” than “roots” and that they have more in common with deaf people living elsewhere than non-deaf people in their own countries (Breivik 2005). While I draw inspiration from Deaf Studies works which explore the ways that sign language serves to create belonging, identity, and sociality (e.g., Padden and Humphries 1988, 2006), I am uncomfortable applying Deaf Studies works written about deaf people in the United States to the experiences of deaf people in India, a very different context.

In addition, while I found some Deaf Studies literature to be relevant to the experiences of deaf people in India-- specifically literature that discusses the ways that deaf people are collective in nature (Mindess 2006) and the importance of story telling for marking one’s relationship to the community (Lane et al. 1996, Bechter 2008, 2009), I struggled with how to apply this literature. In citing Deaf Studies works that emerged out of observations and analysis of American and other western deaf experiences, would I be guilty of the same essentializing and universalising for which I critique Deaf Studies? Similarly, there are a few anthropological works on deafness and deaf experiences although none of these are geographically situated in India (e.g., Becker 1980, Groce 1985, Nakamura 2005, Kisch 2008). Could analytical insights and conclusions from these works be applied to India even though they have nothing at all to do with Indian deaf experiences? After much thought, I have decided to apply Deaf Studies and anthropological literature in cases where it appeared to be particularly relevant. In doing so, I am acknowledging that there are perhaps characteristics and norms that run through deaf sociality in multiple places, although I do not make claims about an essential deaf experience or sociality.
I hope that this dissertation serves to challenge normative Deaf Studies understandings of what a politics around deafness might be as well as what everyday deaf experiences look like. For example, my findings about the role of hierarchies within deaf Indian worlds (Chapter Six) as well as the ambivalence that often accompanies engaging in sameness work (Chapter Four) appears to contradict what has been written about deaf collectiveness and the privileging of deaf identity (e.g., Lane et al 1996, Ladd 2003, Padden and Humphries 1988, 2006, Mindess 2006). I therefore offer this dissertation as a contribution to Deaf Studies as a modest call for attention to the specificity of deaf experiences in different places. Indeed, there are “many ways to be [d]eaf” (Monaghan et al. 2003).

Introduction II
Ontologies Through Words and Phrases

There are certain words and phrases that will appear throughout this dissertation in quotations. These are words and phrases that my interlocutors repeatedly used and I see them as central to understanding the stakes of being deaf in India today. This dissertation is about the aspirations, anxieties, and imaginaries that are bound up in these words and phrases; as such I devote space here to fleshing out these ontologies. As I noted in an earlier section, A Note on Practices, Indian Sign Language does not have a written system. Therefore in this discussion of words and phrases, I first provide English language glosses (that is, word-for-word translations that attend only to the lexical signs and not to grammar) and then I give an italicized version that sometimes does and sometimes does not render the phrase into grammatical English. The discussion of what these words and phrases mean is my attempt to translate them and render them legible. In this discussion, I often use the same words or phrase without italicizing. Note that these are my translations. These words and phrases, or these ontologies, are what this dissertation is about. This can be seen as a second introduction or a road map of sorts--or an introduction in its own right.

DEAF DEAF SAME/ “Deaf Deaf Same”: Deaf people often signed “deaf-deaf-same” in order to express feelings of deaf similitude. By invoking deaf sameness, other forms of difference such as class, gender, age, or religion were minimized, if not erased. “Deaf deaf same” is a way of relating to other deaf people and acknowledging the existence of similar ontologies and ways of being in the world based upon shared experiences of deafness. “Deaf deaf same” was often invoked when first meeting another deaf person or when trying to reconcile differences.

DEAF DEVELOP/ “Deaf Develop”: Deaf development is something that will happen in the not too distant future. Once deaf development occurs, sign language will be recognized, many more deaf and normal people will sign, schools will offer good quality education in sign language, and there will be a variety of vocational opportunities available to deaf people. There will also be sign language interpreters and deaf people will have communication access in different settings. Deaf development, for some of my interlocutors, also meant having consumption power and being able to participate in global consumer culture as deaf participants in normal consumption. More importantly than this, there is a moral component to deaf development: deaf people will become more
confident and strong in their interactions with others and they will no longer be considered inferior to normal people. And developed deaf people will be morally responsible for helping less developed deaf people. Deaf development is therefore a shared moral project.

FUTURE LIFE HOW?/ "Future Life How?": My interlocutors often rhetorically asked questions about what the future would look like for them. This was a question that carried undertones and often obvious tones of anxiety. How will I manage to earn enough money in the face of widespread discrimination against deaf people and lack of government support? How will I survive on my own without a good education? How will I manage in the world as a deaf person? Questions about the future, while tinged with worry and anxiety, were also heavy with aspirations and dreams because deaf development will occur in the not too distant future. Deaf people will be able to develop and they will have opportunities to both participate in global consumer culture as well as in deaf social activities. They will be able to both create deaf structures such as old age homes and engage in consumption experiences such as going on vacations together.

HELP SUPPORT/ "Help and Support": Deaf people often spoke about the importance of offering other deaf people help and support. “Help and support” meant offering people information, guidance, advice, and education. It meant steering others in the direction of deaf development. Deaf people who knew something or had skills that other deaf people did not have were morally required to “help and support” these other deaf people by providing knowledge and education. Deaf people who had better sign language or English skills, who knew about Jesus, or who were involved in innovative business programs were required to “help and support” other deafs.

SEE LEARN/ "See and Learn": Deaf people went to diverse sites such as churches, pyramid scheme recruitment sessions, deaf marriage programs, disability employment fairs, new vocational training programs, and multiple deaf associations’ meetings in order to “see and learn.” Deaf people were interested in “seeing and learning” in all kinds of spaces, as long as there was sign language access. In the absence of communication access in most spaces, the few spaces that were deaf friendly were spaces where deafs could “see and learn.” Being willing to “see and learn” expresses an openness to learning about things which in and of themselves may not seem relevant or interesting and it also expresses hope that there will be something interesting which one can learn, something which might be useful on the path towards deaf development.

SAVE and SPOIL/ “Saved” and “ Spoiled”: Many of my interlocutors were very concerned about being spoiled. Being spoiled meant going down a bad path where one is not developing. Being spoiled meant not having good sign language skills, good morals, or good education and it also meant not having deaf peers and mentors. In contrast, being saved meant that one was learning and developing, and that one was part of a vital and vibrant deaf world. Deaf people saved others at risk of being spoiled: deaf people were morally responsible for saving each other.
SHARE/ “Share”: Sharing meant pooling knowledge, skills, and information in order to help others develop. Sharing was often contrasted with independence as they were seen as incompatible modalities of being in the world. Deafs often told me that they preferred sharing to working independently and that everything that they had learned in elementary school and secondary school had been learned through sharing with other deafs. Learning and developing were seen to be a shared process, always done with others.

HEART OPEN/ “Open Heart”: Many of my interlocutors spoke about having an “open heart.” This “open heart” made it possible for them to attend churches and learn about paths and trajectories that were different from those of their families. Their “open hearts” were contrasted with their families’ “closed hearts”: their families were seen as being closed to new ways of developing and being in the world. The “open heart” desires to learn “deeply” or “fully” and is open to “seeing and learning” in different kinds of settings and situations.
Chapter Two: (Bad) Family/(Good) Friends

Who Teaches Who?

While attending basic computer training classes for deaf young adults at the Employment Center, a non-governmental organization providing computer training and job placement services in Bangalore, I often ate lunch with the students. A popular place to eat lunch was an adjacent park with benches and some green space. The lunch party would commence and participants would open their metal tiffin boxes and eat in a tight cluster. After we finished eating we would close our boxes and clean our hands using a bottle of water. One day a student emptied out the leftovers from her box onto the ground near the bench. In response to this, two other women who were eating with us approached her and told her in a scolding manner: “Why did you do that? This is a nice park. People sit on this bench. Look at the ants now crawling over the food. We need to keep the park clean. You must not empty food out in the park.” In response, the offending girl said: “My friends did not teach me this before. I did not know this.” One of the young women then said: “This is why we are teaching you. So you will learn and not do it again.” I found this interaction compelling for thinking about the central role that the food dropper attached to her friends for teaching her things. She did not mention her family but rather her friends.

The family has played an ambivalent, and largely absent, role within this dissertation. On one hand, I have chosen to focus my dissertation research on the structure of opportunities available to deaf young adults and the spaces that they circulate through in search of deaf development which I define as a desire for educational, social, and economic opportunities which privilege sign language and deaf ways of being in the world. I have therefore decided to situate my research in deaf spaces. And as I will discuss, the family is not considered to be such a deaf space by the majority of my interlocutors. On the other hand my interlocutors were not always young adults. They were previously children and infants. Furthermore, the majority of my interlocutors continue to live with their families, often sharing small living spaces where they are in constant contact with family members. However, as I discuss throughout this chapter, many of my interlocutors constantly told me that they felt that they had little or no communication with their families. They lamented the fact that their parents did not know sign language and they told me that the only thing that their parents talked to them about was food, whether or not they were hungry or had enough to eat, and sleep, when it was time to go to sleep.14

In this chapter I provide background on the relationship between deaf young adults and their families and I explore the stakes of being a deaf infant and child in urban India. I provide this background through drawing on interviews with deaf young adults and their families about their experiences of both growing up deaf and raising a deaf child. I also draw on interviews conducted with educators, government bureaucrats working in the field of disability education, early intervention specialists, and non-governmental organization community based rehabilitation workers. Throughout this

14 My interlocutors were therefore critiquing the fact that they were being treated as “bare life” by their families and that only their basic human needs, those focused on providing bodily sustenance, were being provided for in this setting (Agamben 1998). See Chapter Eight for more on transitions from “bare life” to other kinds of moral and social life.
chapter I argue that deaf children and young adults often felt alienated within their families due to feeling that communication was lacking and that they often did not see the structure of their families to be meaningful for them. They claimed that they did not learn from their families. As such, deaf young adults often felt uneasy around their families and preferred to spend time in spaces other than domestic spaces. As I will discuss, this desire to spend time elsewhere often led to confrontations and tensions with parents who did not understand this desire.

Let me be clear about an essential point that I am trying to make here: articulating a desire for understanding, communication, and learning was something that my interlocutors learned as young adults. Similarly, they learned how to critique their families in relation to a perceived lack of these things. As I will argue in this chapter, and throughout this dissertation, understanding, communicating, and learning from others are values that deaf young adults learn as they formally and informally learn the values of deaf sociality and the importance of sign language. These values are part of deaf development and my interlocutors often invoked these values in relation to their families: they are invoked specifically to demonstrate that their families do not have such values. The space of the family is contrasted with the spaces of deaf development.

A Short Review of Literature on Disability and Deafness in Anthropology

Anthropological literature on disability, especially in non-western contexts, often looks at the relationship between the disabled person and her family in order to explore how the experience of disability is not only an individual experience but also effects the family as well as the broader social environment in which the person lives (Devlieger 1995, Talle 1995). Veena Das and Renu Addlakha (2001) situate their work on disabled women in urban India within the domestic sphere. They argue that a focus on the domestic sphere is an antidote to (mostly) western works on disability which view disability as exclusively a public and political issue concerned with juridical rights and citizenship as tied to the state. For them, a focus on the domestic sphere allows for examining other forms of voice, agency, and citizenship which they claim is absent from the public sphere. Similarly, Rayna Rapp and Faye Ginsburg (2001) also look at families of disabled children in order to explore how these families come to be disabled families as they re-orient themselves to new understandings of disability, intimacy, and care. These works that I have just mentioned dovetail nicely with Lawrence Cohen’s (1998) work on senility in India in which he argues that senility is a relational concept that requires the presence of others, often the family, in order for it to be made meaningful. He writes: “Senility is acutely attributional; it almost always requires two bodies, a senile body and a second body that recognizes the change in the first” (Cohen 1998, 33). While Cohen’s work is not specifically about disability as a category, it is about ability trouble and the ways that space of the family (as well as the social) play an important role in, and even come to define, our understanding of the experience of senility.

However in contrast to this anthropological literature on disability, anthropological literature on deafness and deaf people has not focused on the family except to explore how deaf people come to create new kinship networks and

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15 Weddings, family puja obligations, and other family functions were often talked about with dread. Not only were they boring but they were thought to be isolating for my interlocutors. “There is no one to talk to there.”
organizations which can take the place of the family (Breivik 2005, Becker 1980, Nakamura 2006). Jan Kare Breivik (2005) argues that Scandinavian deaf people see themselves in terms of routes instead of roots and that transnational deaf experiences often provide deaf people with more of a sense of belonging than being with their biological families or within the nation-state that they are citizens of (also see Haualand 2007). Gay Becker’s (1980) work on deaf senior citizens in the United States explores how belonging to a deaf community throughout a deaf person’s life provides aged deaf people with skills to cope with aging. While Becker does not explicitly mention the family besides to point out that deaf children were often sent to residential schools and therefore spent limited time with their families, she does point to the importance of the deaf community to deaf people. Paul Preston (1994) writes about the complicated identity, language, and community work that hearing children of deaf adults must do to negotiate hearing and deaf individual and family identities. Preston’s work builds on that of Becker’s in that he explores how strong deaf social networks, formed in spaces such as deaf residential schools, impact these families. In addition there is anthropological literature that explores the role of language, specifically sign language, in creating conditions of integration (or exclusion) for deaf people within societies. For example, Nora Groce’s (1985) work on the history of Martha’s Vineyard and Shifra Kisch’s (2008) contemporary work on the El- Sayyid Bedouins, in very different contexts and temporal moments, examine the role of deaf and deaf- hearing relationships in communities in which many hearing people know sign language; both anthropologists argue that deaf people seem to be more integrated within these communities in which sign language is widely used.16

This anthropological literature on deafness, in its focus on deaf organizations, deaf schools, and deaf events, compliments Deaf Studies literature. Indeed, Deaf Studies literature has traditionally focused on the ways that deaf people are a linguistic and cultural minority within a majority hearing world and culture. While the majority of deaf children (ninety percent) are born to hearing families, they are not like their parents. Deaf Studies literature explores the emergence of identity around deafness and argues that the privileging of sign language places deaf people in opposition to the hearing world, which devalues and tries to oppress its usage (Lane, 1992, Lane et al. 1996, Padden and Humphries 1988, 2006, Ladd 2003, Bauman 2008). As Carol Padden and Tom Humphries (1988) argue, deaf people have a different center than hearing people in which the experience of deafness and the use of sign language is the norm. And this can, and often does, result in deaf people seeking affiliations and belonging outside their families. Tensions between deaf and hearing ways of being in the world (of which language is a constitutive part) permeates this literature (Lane 1993, Lane et al. 1996). And the recurring theme is that deaf children are not like their parents and deaf people are not like hearing people.

While I do not want to ignore the family, or the space of the domestic (and by implication fall into the trap of what Das and Addlakha (2001) would call a western-centered lens), I also feel strongly that it is important to privilege and foreground what is

16 Annelies Kusters (2009) warns us to be careful about presuming that communities in which some hearing people sign are sign language utopias. She asks important questions about how deaf people may still be marked as an unequal or inferior despite the fact that there are hearing signers and she encourages us not to ignore the fact that in most cases deaf people are still a minority that lacks power.
important to my interlocutors-- and it is for this reason that the family plays a less than prominent role in this work. It is also possible that if my research were focused on deaf people who were either older (living in conjugal families) or younger (still in school), the family would play a larger role in the project. In other writings (Friedner 2008, 2010a), I have analyzed how and where older deaf women in Delhi experience a sense of belonging and in doing so, following Das and Addlakha (2001), I critiqued the above mentioned Deaf Studies literature which relegates deaf belonging solely to the public sphere. I argued that my interlocutors experienced a sense of belonging in multiple spaces including their homes, deaf organizations, and their workplaces. While this is also true for the young adults with whom I worked for this project, a more productive and relevant question here might be: Why is the family such an ambivalent space?¹⁷

Conducting Interviews with Families

I conducted home visits with approximately twenty nine families of deaf young adults. Initially I planned to conduct structured interviews with both parents and their young adult children in the hopes of creating an environment that was communicatively open to all parties in which both the deaf young adult and their parents had language access. I felt strongly that ensuring language access was important after witnessing my interlocutors’ constant discussions about their feelings of exclusion within family experiences; I did not want to reproduce these. However, I quickly learned that providing communication access to all parties was impossible in most cases. Let me explain why. For families whose primary languages were Kannada, Telugu, Hindi, or Urdu I initially brought a translator to the meeting. This person was responsible for facilitating communication between the parents, other relatives who happened to be present, and myself. However, the question remained of who would interpret for the deaf young adult? It was impossible to find a qualified sign language interpreter in Bangalore who was available for these meetings as there were only three or four such interpreters in the city. In some cases, there was a sibling who knew some sign language and so he or she would interpret-- although I noted that in most cases the information being provided was not complete and accurate. In other cases, I interpreted and therefore engaged in a complicated juggling act through which I asked questions via the translator, attempted to understand what the translator was relaying to me, and then I tried to provide all of this information in sign language to my deaf interlocutor.¹⁸

Occasionally two different interviews happened simultaneously as my deaf interlocutors also answered questions and their answers were sometimes in direct contradiction to what their families told me. In at least a few cases, families told me that they felt that they had good communication with their deaf child and that he or she was included in conversations and family events. Also, many parents told me that they loved their deaf child more than their other children. When I interpreted this for the child, he or

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¹⁷ In response to Das and Addlakha (2001), I would also argue that my focus, while not on the domestic, is not on the public and the political in the sense that they are critiquing it. Rather I am looking at how deaf young adults create deaf spaces which are not necessarily oriented towards demanding or claiming rights. As I discuss throughout this dissertation, my focus is not on contentious politics and deaf political movements but rather the everyday experiences of deaf people as they circulate through deaf spaces. While these might be considered deaf publics, they are publics that are largely illegible to the state.

¹⁸ As I communicate mostly via reading lips, I had to wait to receive all information from the translator before I could sign it to the other deaf person in the room-- a very slow process.
she would adamantly reply otherwise and say “I am always bored at home;” “No one ever talks to me;” “I ask for information and I am not told anything;” or “They all talk to each other and do not tell me anything.” The fact that many families told me that they “loved” their deaf children more than other children while deaf children continued to feel excluded and outside family communication foregrounds a discordance in perspectives on what love or care means. For families, love and communication were two different things while deafs, through their participation within deaf sociality, came to see love and communication as existing hand in hand. There could be no love without communication.

There were times when these interviews were tense and heavy with sentiments not shared. Occasionally, deaf children told me not to repeat what they had said in front of their parents, especially when it was about interacting with someone from the opposite sex or going to church, and there were also times when families used my presence as a means of gathering information about their deaf children. For instance, during an interview with Zahra’s family, conservative lower class Muslims living in Bangalore whom I met through my research at the Disabled Peoples Association, I asked Zahra’s mother, through my Urdu translator, if Zahra spent a lot of time outside the family’s home and if she was sent to shops for milk and other items. Zahra’s mother thought about it for a second and said that she did not think that Zahra went out into the neighborhood often and then she turned to me and asked if I would ask Zahra this very same question. She then asked the translator if I could ask Zahra about what she did the previous weekend while she was out with some deaf friends. Zahra’s mother said that I could communicate better with Zahra and she was hoping to gain more information about how her daughter had spent her time socializing. While I was talking to her mother, Zahra had some friends over and they sat in a tight circle having a conversation in sign language which Zahra’s mother could not understand. In this case, Zahra preferred to chat with her deaf friends (and so perhaps my anxieties around providing access, at least in this situation, were unfounded-- although I must stress that Zahra could not have participated in my conversation with her mother even if she wanted to as I was not doing a good job interpreting).

While conducting these interviews, I had increasing concerns about my deaf interlocutors not having access to these interviews. I also realized that I was not actually learning very much either because I was perhaps isolating speech acts and missing the gap between what people say and what they do. I therefore changed my strategy after the first few home visits. Instead I tried to enlist the deaf child as the interpreter/communication mediator and I did not bring another interpreter. This was important to me as I wanted to see how deaf children and their hearing families communicated. In some cases children were able to communicate orally with their parents. In other cases, parents and deaf children had developed a home sign system (gestures and signs that are understood by members of the family, although not the researcher) or they knew a few basic signs which their children taught them. There were also cases in which siblings knew some sign language and they interpreted. Deaf interlocutors with signing siblings often told me that these siblings were sources of support and conversation at home. And when spoken and sign communication failed, I would often just spend time with the family, hanging out and drinking tea.

Communication Gaps and their Effects
These visits tended to further my understanding of the communication gap between deaf children and their parents. According to Sreela Bose, a former technical advisor to the International Deaf Children’s Society’s (IDCS) India based project, deaf young adults often came to her to express frustration about their lack of communication with their parents. She told me that she had heard many stories of young adults feeling isolated, sad, and depressed about their ability to communicate with their families. Bose told me that she thought that families were to blame and that they did not make enough of an effort to reach out to their deaf children. An article in an October 2007 newsletter published by IDCS India states:

“Approximately 50% of deaf children have emotional, behavioral and social difficulties as compared to 25% of children in the general population. A major reason for these difficulties is the frustration that most deaf children feel at not being able to communicate, even with their own family members. It is estimated that over 80% of families of deaf children never learn to communicate with the children.”

While I am not sure where IDCS’s numbers come from and what in particular is meant by “emotional, behavioral, and social difficulties,” the article makes a provocative point. It is essential to note that the lack of parent-child communication can have significant results on the language and overall development of deaf children in general. Western researchers in the field of deaf education and childhood development have pointed to the importance of early intervention for the appropriate development of language in deaf infants and children. Of singular importance is communication between mothers and deaf children (Paul 2009, Marschark et al. 2002). Deaf children are not able to passively learn through overhearing and imitation and those children born to hearing parents (which is at least ninety percent of deaf children) do not have access to competent language models (Marshark et al. 2002, 12). As such a pointed effort needs to be made to promote language development through providing deaf children with a language rich environment that could include amplification devices such as hearing aids, sign language, and repetition of auditory verbal exercises by mothers and other family members.

According to P. Nagapoornima et al. (2007), India does not have standardized neo-natal hearing screening and most cases of deafness in India are not diagnosed until after two years of age. This means that by the time deafness, or hearing impairment, is diagnosed, language development has already been delayed. In India, both early diagnosis and early intervention rarely happen and deaf children lack competent language models in both spoken or sign languages. They are also not provided with appropriate amplification devices, such as hearing aids, upon diagnosis. This means that deaf children

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19 IDCS’s statement also makes me a bit uneasy in light of the fact that throughout my research I was told by multiple hearing administrators and teachers that their deaf students were emotionally immature, prone to gossiping, unaware of social norms, and so on. In many cases these hearing administrators and teachers did not know sign language very well and consequently did not understand their students’ words and actions. In other cases, students were not provided with access to important information about social norms, appropriate behavior, etc. I appreciate however that IDCS, and Bose, are not placing the onus on deaf children but rather on their families and the social and educational structures that they are supposed to be receiving such information from.
then start school with significant language delays. It seems important to point out that studies have shown that deaf children with deaf parents who use sign language often reach the same milestones as their hearing peers at the same time. This happens because there is unobstructed communication between deaf parents and deaf children. On the other hand, deaf children with hearing parents lag behind. These studies emphasize that with communication access, deaf children can achieve the same milestones as hearing peers at the same time. (Marschark et al. 2002, 8).

However, due to poor education which does not provide sufficient language development and language access, most deaf children fall behind their hearing peers and according to research done in the United States, the majority of children with severe to profound hearing impairment read at fourth to sixth grade reading level upon graduation from high school (Paul 2009). According to Paul (2009), there is a plateau phenomenon that takes place as deaf children move into more advanced school settings and encounter more decontextualized or literate language demands (ibid, 285). This dovetails with research which shows that deaf learners often do better with more concrete language and that they struggle with abstract concepts, ostensibly because of a dearth of exposure to them (Marschark 2001, 2007). While I have not come across any research which specifically focuses on deaf childrens’ educational development in India, it seems safe to generalize, based upon my research, that deaf education is imperfect and that the majority of deaf children leave school lagging behind their hearing peers in terms of reading and writing skills.

While the research discussed earlier primarily focuses on childhood and educational development, it is important to think about the stakes of this for young adults who have had such childhood and educational experiences. The majority of my interlocutors did not read newspapers because the English or vernacular language used was too difficult for them. Television was also inaccessible to them as there were often no subtitles and when there were, they were too difficult to read or they moved across the screen too quickly. News came from other deaf people or from hearing people who knew sign language. This is not to say that my interlocutors were not curious about what was happening in the world and throughout my research I was often asked for my opinions about Presidents Bush and Obama, India and Pakistan, and why there was a global recession. Local news and sporting news were also often topics of spirited discussion and question and answer sessions.

The public sphere was not the only space where deaf young adults lacked access to news and information. Many of the deaf young adults with whom I worked told me that they did not know important information about puberty, how to interact with people of the opposite sex, and appropriate ways of dealing with anger and tension until other

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20 There are a handful of early intervention programs located around the country. One notable program is Bala Vidyalaya in Chennai which provides intensive early intervention to deaf children under the age of two and a half years. Children and their mothers must attend daily (in rare situations, grandparents or other relatives may attend) and the program also offers a pre-school to children who have completed the early intervention program. The Tamil Nadu state government is now offering a pilot early intervention program in partnership with Bala Vidalaya in rural areas. Critics of this program contend that it is elitist and only wealthy families attend, that it requires a great deal of resources, and that it only based on the oral method.

21 Due to ethical concerns around making claims that deaf people are less capable of abstract thought, there has not been much research on this topic and research has often instead focused on how deaf children are not different from hearing children (Marschark 2007).
deaf people taught them these things. Young women often told me that they never
learned about their menstrual cycles from their mothers or other relatives nor were they
taught the nuts and bolts of sexual intercourse. I was also told again and again by both
young men and women that they did not know how to have romantic relationships until
their friends explained it to them. One young woman told me: “I had my first love and we
kissed. But then I did not know what was supposed to happen. Were we supposed to get
married right away? Was that it? I was very confused.” Luckily, a friend who had more
experience in these matters explained what it meant to date and have a boyfriend. I was
told too by deaf young adults that they learned good manners and habits such as saying
“please” and “thank you,” how to use a soup spoon without having it touch your teeth
and make noise, and how to avoid fighting with classmates from other deaf people. In
almost all cases, my interlocutors told me that they learned important information from
other deafs, and not from their families or at schools.

Parents were often aware of communication gaps and, in frustration or
exasperation, they approached teachers and NGO administrators who knew sign language
for support and interpreting services when they felt like they needed help explaining
something to their deaf child. While spending time at the Disabled Peoples Association
(DPA), an NGO which offers popular vocational training programs for deaf young adults
who have finished class ten, I often witnessed families soliciting help from Radhika, the
principal of the industrial training center, in communicating with their child. On one
occasion, another DPA teacher who knew some sign language interpreted for a mother
and her deaf daughter as they debated how much spending money the daughter should
have per day for snacks and tea.

On another occasion, Radhika was asked to “talk some sense” into a student who
was less interested in his studies than in pursuing young women. And on a home visit that
Radhika and I conducted together, we were intermediaries between a hostile older brother
and Narayanan, his younger deaf brother. Narayanan had come from the family’s rural
native village to live with his older brother in Bangalore. Narayanan’s older brother did
not understand why Narayanan was spending so much time with other deaf people
instead of at home. Narayanan tried to explain that he felt that he was isolated at home
with little communication. Radhika helped him to explain by interpreting from sign
language to Kannada. For Narayanan, spending time with other deafs offered him
opportunities for knowledge sharing while he could not communicate very well with his
brother or sister-in-law at home. In addition to these kinds of interventions, Radhika
would often make phone calls home for students to relay information to families about
diverse matters including why a student would be home late, what kind of sporting or
cultural program they would be attending, and when final exams would be held. Students
were unable to communicate this information themselves to their parents.

In August of 2007, Radhika and I organized a parents workshop at DPA for
parents of students in the various training programs. During the workshop, Radhika

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22 Domestic issues were therefore made public as outsiders were brought in to interpret. This dovetails with
Rapp and Ginsberg’s (2001) work on the public-ness of families with children with disabilities and the new
forms of public intimacy that come to exist.
23 During the summer of 2007, I was a University of California at Berkeley Human Rights Fellow at DPA
and Radhika generously permitted me to help organize events so that I could interact with parents and
families.
asked parents to stand up and recount a good conversation that they had with their deaf child and to share how they had this conversation. Our goal was to solicit strategies for improving communication between deaf children and hearing parents. None of the approximately fifteen parents were able to do this, and instead they talked about how happy they were that their son or daughter was learning at DPA. Afterwards, a father told me that he wrote back and forth with his daughter and that he felt that this worked well, something that I had heard from other parents too. DPA occasionally offered sign language classes and families said that they wanted these classes. However, enrollment often dropped off after the first few weeks as parents had to balance other competing commitments including work schedules and home responsibilities. In parent workshops that DPA offered, Radhika constantly encouraged parents to learn sign language from their deaf children and parents said that they would do this although most invariably did not.

According to Radhika, most families that she queried about why they do not know or use sign language told her that they feel shame around using sign language as it marks them as different that others; they feel that they have sufficient communication without using sign language; no one ever told them while their child was small or while their child was growing up that they should learn sign language; and they never realized the importance of communication and instead focused on providing basic needs such as food, clothing, and education. Many families also told Radhika that they were instructed by schools and audiologists specifically not to sign with their children. I heard similar sentiments and families also told me that it was “too late” to learn. I was often told: “My child is now grown up and we have managed this long. Why should I have to change now?”

However, this is not to say that parents do not want their deaf children to do well. Almost all of the families whom I met spoke about the grief and despair that they felt when they found out that their child was deaf. Many families had stories of taking their children to temple after temple in search of healing. Other families told me about the expensive Ayurvedic and western medicines that they purchased for their child on the advice of this or that doctor in the hopes that their child would be cured. They spoke of arduous journeys to the All India Institute of Speech and Hearing (AIISH) in Mysore to consult with doctors and audiologists and about long waits in waiting rooms to see these doctors and audiologists. In many cases, looking for treatment and services was a gendered responsibility that fell on the shoulders of mothers. And mothers also told me about traveling daily to preschool with their deaf child at one of the deaf schools in the city in order to learn how to best work with their children.

During a home visit with an upper caste and class young man, Sarnath, in his early twenties and his parents, Sarnath’s mother reminisced about how she used to accompany him every day to school when he was small; they would travel by auto-rickshaw together. Now that he is older, she told me that he does not have time for her. “We used to be so close when we went to school every day together when he was a child but now all he wants to do is go off with his friends and use this sign language. Why does he need this sign language?” This mother refers back to her son’s early childhood as a counterpoint to what she sees as his current estrangement from her. We were so close then and he is so distant now. I will come back to this theme of estrangement, which operates in both directions, after I finish discussing educational options and experiences.
Oralism versus Sign Language: Oral Despite All Odds (Or Really?)

There seems to be a bit of a paradox here: families do not engage in the needed early intervention to provide children with the crucial language skills to communicate in spoken language, yet they become upset when their children start using sign language which is the language most accessible to them. Most deaf schools in Bangalore, and India at large, are oral schools, at least on paper, and many principals and school administrators that I interviewed scorned manual, or sign language, based education. My experience, however, is that in India oral education is never fully oral in practice and that it is an imagined ideal type. And as schools claim to be oral schools, this prevents more appropriate communication and educational policies and methods from being developed.

The oral method focuses on using auditory verbal techniques to teach deaf children how to lipread and speak. This method is most successful when it is started from an early age, usually before the age of one year, and when it is accompanied by appropriate amplification and by parents (and families) playing a significant role in helping their children learn to pronounce and decipher sounds. For oral education to have a chance at succeeding, classroom sizes must be appropriately small and teachers must have experience using auditory verbal methods. In addition, oral education has become more and more technology dependent in that high quality hearing aids and cochlear implants can increase the likelihood of success (Power and Leigh 2004, xiii). Most of the schools that I visited in India had class sizes over ten students, teachers were not extensively trained in auditory verbal methods, and children wore old model body hearing aids (also see Broota 2005).

In an interview with a senior audiologist at the AIISH, I was told that most deaf children in India grow up without appropriate amplification or training to make use of the sounds that they may be able to hear. This audiologist told me what most of my interlocutors had already told me repeatedly-- that body aids were largely ineffective despite being so frequently given out by both state and national governments through their disability programs and at NGO sponsored hearing camps. In talking with deaf young adults about their experiences with body aids, I came to understand why many were closed to the possibility of using hearing aids that were more advanced in technology and which may have benefited them: wearing the body aid was seen as being

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24 Education for deaf children is an extremely polarized and contentious topic and advocates generally fall into two opposing ideological camps: oralism (using auditory verbal techniques to teach deaf children to speech read and speak) and manualism (using sign language to teach written language; this is called bilingualism in deaf education). Many researchers believe that this polarization has meant that deaf children are not adequately served. As Easterbrooks and Baker (2002) write: “Perhaps deaf and hard of hearing children have not fully reached their potential because of the long history of factionalism in philosophies and methods of deaf education” (ibid, viii). While all deaf children are different and variables such as age of hearing loss onset, severity of hearing loss, etiology, economic status of parents and caregivers, and location of the child all go into creating a very individualized picture of hearing loss, deaf and hard of hearing children are routinely depicted as homogenous and advocates of different kinds of deaf education routinely offer one size fits all solutions (Paul 2009).

25 As Paul (2009) points out, the key issue in oral education is whether or not deaf and hard of hearing children are actually exposed to or can perceive a “full blown spoken language such as English” (ibid, 16). Paul states that a large number of these children who are exposed to oral systems “do not start school with a working knowledge of English or any other language to be used as a base for communication and learning” (ibid, 18). As such, there is no foundation for oral education to build on.
so stigmatizing and unhelpful that they had decided that they were done with all hearing aids. Many of my interlocutors had stories about wearing these body aids because they were forced to do so by their parents or teachers and then taking them off as soon as they were permitted to do so at the end of the school day. And so children never received the appropriate amplification and training that they needed to benefit from oral education. According to the senior audiologist at AIISH, this is one of the main reasons why so many deaf young adults currently use sign language although I would argue that it is also because sign language is the most accessible language for deaf people and that using it brings other benefits as well which I discuss further on in this chapter.

And so oral schools are not really oral schools. Here I emphasize this point by talking about one of India’s best-known and well-regarded oral schools. During the summer of 2009, I took a trip to Chennai in order to visit The Little Flower Convent School for the Deaf. As a result of its reputation, deaf children and their mothers from all over India travel to enroll at the school, which was started in 1926 by the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Girls and boys (boys attend until fourth standard and then transfer to a neighboring boys school called the St. Louis School) are strictly required to speak to each other at all times. Students sit in classes of around twelve to fifteen students and strain to follow their teachers’ mouth movements. Some of these students use hearing aids and others do not. Throughout my research I heard stories from alumni about having their hands and wrists hit with rulers for using sign language in between classes and they reminisced about the strictness of their former teachers and principals. Families who spent time at the school in the past told me that I would never find sign language being used at the school.

However, when I visited the school in order to attend an alumni reunion function (which was ironically conducted entirely in sign language), I observed that in between and after classes most of the students signed to each other. This did not really surprise

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26 One alumna in her early forties told me about having her knuckles painfully rapped and she felt that this was particularly unjust as her parents were deaf as well and she needed to use sign language to communicate with them.

27 This reunion was an attempt to create an alumni association for the school and it included over one hundred former students of all ages. Programs were entirely in sign language and speakers talked about the importance of sign language and sign language development in India which was especially interesting in light of the fact that the Little Flower Convent School is an oral school. Most alumni were extremely angry about their oral education and felt that it did not help them in the long run as they could not communicate well with either hearing or deaf people. During a presentation, one of the alumni association leaders
me as I saw this practice at all of the deaf schools that I visited and it led me to my conclusion that a pure oral school is an ideal type that never occurs in reality, at least not in India. When I spoke with Sister Mary Peter, the school’s retired principal who is still extremely influential in the field of deaf education, she told me that she no longer thought it was possible for Little Flower to be an oral school as the children staying in the hostel use sign language at night, after classes, and on the weekends. In addition Sister Rita Mary told me that because the school offered both Tamil and English medium, sign language was the way that students in the different mediums communicated with each other. The school had tried very diligently to keep the two mediums separate: English and Tamil medium hostel students are not permitted to share a room and they also eat their meals in separate cafeterias. However, this attempt at segregation was not successful and the students mingled.

When I asked Sister Mary Peter how she felt about this, she seemed resigned. On one hand, she told me that she firmly believed that “you cannot teach everything through sign language” and that the decline in oral education is the reason why deaf people are no longer being employed at government banks and other government bureaucracies. However, she told me that she had come to realize that “deaf children are a heterogeneous group” and that there were deaf children for whom sign language was appropriate: children with multiple disabilities and children from poor families whose parents were too busy to work diligently with them on oral training. Sister Mary Peter’s categories of children who would best be served by sign language education shows her lack of respect for the language. Yet it is important to note that despite Sister Mary Peter’s perspective on sign language, students still learned it from each other and continued to communicate in it.

A Meeting for Change?

When I met with Sister Mary Peter in the summer of 2009, she had just returned from a nationwide meeting held at the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) where Indian experts and educators in the field of deaf education were summoned from all over India (Calcutta, Bombay, Chennai, Bhopal, and Delhi), to discuss the current problems within deaf education. This meeting was notable because it included both deaf and hearing stakeholders from a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives. According to Ezra John, the general secretary of RCI: “It was important to have such a meeting. I am sick of all this fighting between the oralists and the manualists and I wanted to force them to sit in the same room and talk to each other.” Mr. John told me that the impetus for the meeting was the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) which specifically called for education in sign language. In addition, there was increasing awareness that deaf children in India were not getting a good education.

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mimicked an illegible oral deaf child and mocked the school’s authorities by taking about how deaf children sign under the covers at night.

28 While this is one version of a reason/rationale, other reasons for diminished deaf government employment, according to Mr. T. Raghava the general secretary of the All India Deaf Bank Employees Association, include the fact that the quota system has been changed to allow people with more mild hearing losses to apply for quotas, the fact that the work has become more computerized and therefore requires more specific technical skills which many deaf young adults do not have, and finally, the quotas are now saturated in many places as deafs who were hired in the 1970s and 1980s are still in their positions.
In interviewing people who participated in the meeting and reviewing notes that were compiled afterwards by RCI, I learned that participants did indeed talk to each other although advocates of increased opportunities for sign language were in the minority of those present and they resented the “Chennai dominance and power” exercised by Sister Mary Peter and Mrs. Monika Ravendra, the director of a well respected oral early intervention program and pre-school named Bala Vidalaya. Both have long worked closely with the RCI to ensure that oral methods are foregrounded. According to critics, the “Chennai model” of oral education is not universally replicable as it requires that parents be extremely invested and available and it also requires immense state funding and resources which states other than Tamil Nadu lack or are reluctant to provide.

However, for the first time at RCI, education in sign language was explicitly discussed as was the importance of having schools that used sign language as the medium of instruction. There was discussion about the importance of including sign language in special education teacher training courses and ensuring that teachers of deaf children had sign language competence. Participants discussed the importance of ensuring that there were opportunities for deaf children and their families to learn about and have access to Indian Sign Language (ISL) although there was no specific discussion of how to do this. In follow up visits to RCI it became clear to me that RCI administrators did not have an understanding of Indian Sign Language as a “real” language: they thought that it could be taught to teachers and other stakeholders within fifteen days. Indeed, as a result of India’s ratification of the UNCRPD which specifically mentions the importance of sign language and recognizing deaf people as a linguistic minority, the RCI had instituted a series of fifteen day sign language training programs for teachers and administrators working with deaf children throughout the country in the spring and summer of 2009.29

At this RCI meeting it was also emphasized that all Indian deaf children should have access to appropriate amplification devices although policies and processes for ensuring that this happens were not discussed. As I mentioned, most children use the one size fits all body aid because this is all the government disability allowance provides them with. Appropriately fitting ear molds are not provided nor is there maintenance for these devices. It will be interesting to see what kinds of advances in hearing aid technology are developed-- especially as cochlear implants now loom large in technology development circles and within a medical apparatus that is interested in eradicating and curing deafness. Indeed, in a 2007 meeting with a former disability minister, I was told that the government was currently developing technology for cochlear implants, thereby skipping the possibilities of less invasive higher end digital hearing aids. Currently the state of Andhra Pradesh provides below poverty line deaf and hearing impaired children with such implants although it is not clear how many children have undergone the surgery nor is it clear how they have benefited-- especially as for cochlear implantation to be successful, there must be significant follow up and auditory training.30

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29 Article 24, which deals with education, specifically states: “Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community” and is extremely clear in its advocacy of sign language as being valuable and important.

30 Here I am reminded of Ashish Nandy’s (1988) comments about India’s love of spectacular technology and the work that such technology does for the state. If the Indian defense ministry were to develop a low cost cochlear implant, the state would appear to be helping to eradicate, or at least manage, deafness through development of technology.
organization of this RCI meeting illustrates that there are a diversity of perspectives on deaf education in India as well as a growing awareness of the fact that deaf education is not meeting the needs of most deaf children.

Choosing a Deaf School in Bangalore

Very few of the families whom I interviewed in Bangalore sent their children to Chennai to attend school although this is where India’s most well respected deaf schools are located. Before the mid 1960s, deaf children and their families had no choice but to travel to Chennai if they wanted to attend a deaf school. In 1966, a deaf school, the Sheila Kothavala Institute for the Deaf (SKID), was established in Bangalore. The school was started with the help of the Sisters from the Little Flower Convent as a result of the initiative of a prominent Parsi family with a deaf daughter (who had attended Little Flower). After SKID opened its doors, families in search of educational opportunities no longer had to travel to Chennai. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, other deaf schools also opened in Bangalore although none of them were established with the same level of financial support and technical expertise as SKID. SKID offers only English medium education and while it started out as strictly an oral school, under the auspices of the Sisters who helped start and administer the school, there is now one deaf teacher who uses sign language and most classes are taught in a mixture of sign language and English - despite the fact that none of the teachers have been formally trained in sign language.

It should be noted that despite the fact that SKID was founded as a strictly oral school, there has been a sign language presence in the school since the 1970s when Father Harry, a Roman Catholic missionary, came to Bangalore to teach the deaf. Father Harry was an excellent signer and much to the dismay of Sister Rachel, SKID’s first principal, he taught sign language to the students. An avid lover of music and drama, he organized sign language drama troupes and taught sign language songs to students. After Father Harry settled in Bangalore, other American and Canadian missionaries came to SKID to work with students on leadership and sign language development. In talking with members of the Deaf Aid Society who governed and oversaw the development of SKID during the 1970s, I learned that there was often a lot of tension and debate over what direction SKID should take in terms of providing oral or sign language based education. The constant presence of foreigners - the Little Flower Sisters, Father Harry, American Catholic missionaries, international deaf university students - served to create a very diverse communicative atmosphere in which multiple ideologies around deaf education were discussed and experimented with.

SKID now offers its teachers weekly sign language classes and the school’s principal is committed to trying to create a bilingual (sign language and English) environment. This is not true for the other schools in Bangalore, most of which are adamantly oral (again, on paper), and a few of which have no commitments in terms of teaching and function merely as holding pens for deaf children where teaching, in the form of writing things on the blackboard for students to copy, occasionally happens.

31 The deaf woman who was the motivation for the founding of SKID hoped to be able to teach at SKID. She had tried to teach at Little Flower after finishing her education there and traveling to the United States to study further at Gallaudet University and the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, but Little Flower refused to accept a deaf teacher. However, while she volunteered at SKID weekly after it was founded, she found full time employment at a government bank.
There are currently seven deaf schools in Bangalore and SKID has the best reputation for providing quality education although many of its students and graduates have significant difficulty with reading and writing. By some accounts, there has been a decline in student achievement as the school has recently had to struggle more for funding and students come from increasingly less wealthy and middle class families.

So how do parents decide where to send their child to school? For the majority of the families whom I interviewed, the two factors that went into choosing a school for their deaf child were language of instruction and proximity to home; most learned about the various schools through word of mouth, audiologists, or referrals from the AIISH or the Institute of Speech and Hearing (ISH) in Bangalore. As deaf children are exempt from second language requirements due to the difficulty of learning language, their education takes place in one language. Most families chose English medium instruction for their child even if they themselves did not know English. Parents told me that they were counseled to do this by audiologists and counselors as “English was the most important language for their child to learn for future job opportunities.” There were families, however, who chose Kannada medium. There is one deaf school in Bangalore that only offers Kannada medium and there are other schools that offer a choice of Kannada or English medium. These families felt that it was more important that they be able to communicate with their child in their mother tongue.32

This choice of mother tongue education ultimately becomes a source of frustration and anger for deaf children who, after finishing class ten, overwhelmingly flock to vocational training programs and employment situations where English is required. While spending time with Aisha, a deaf young woman in her early twenties, Aisha complained to me about being educated in Kannada medium. She is now struggling to learn English and is attending an English medium college where she receives a special accommodation of taking her exams in Kannada. Aisha learns English and sign language from Chetan, a deaf government worker, and his wife, Sushma, who live close by. Aisha told me that she was extremely angry with her parents for placing her in Kannada medium as now she is struggling to learn English.

When I asked Aisha’s mother about this, she earnestly told me that she wanted her daughter to speak the same language, the family’s mother tongue, because she and the rest of their family did not know English well at all. I met many young adults with similar frustrations who were less than enthusiastic about the hard work that they now needed to do in order to learn English after they finished their secondary school educations. In their frustration, they did not value the fact that they could communicate in their mother tongue nor did they value their mother tongue in the same way that their families did. I observed in many cases that even when they were educated in their mother tongue, deaf young adults could not carry on a conversation with their parents or others. It should be noted that dissatisfaction with mother tongue education emerges as deaf young adults

32 Sign language activists in India often speak about sign language being a deaf child’s mother tongue (Bhattacharya 2010). This is a political claim, often made in the hopes of receiving government funding and recognition under the Right to Education Act of 2010 which calls for instruction in mother tongue in government schools and is designed to protect endangered indigenous languages. This is especially interesting in light of the fact that deaf children’s families do not know or use sign language. Deaf children learn sign language from each other and from deaf and hearing adults who know the language-- can this qualify as a “mother tongue”? I have been told on many occasions by sign language activists in India and elsewhere that sign language is a deaf child’s mother tongue and natural language.
finish class ten and realize that for many vocational paths, especially in the Information Technology (IT) sector, English is essential.

Many wealthier parents send their children to normal private schools although out of the five families whom I interviewed who did this, four wound up transferring their child to SKID as he or she fell behind and was not able to keep up with hearing peers. I was told that none of the normal schools offered deaf children additional services or support and deaf children were treated just like everyone else. The children, now young adults, spoke fondly about transferring to the deaf school, SKID, and being able to follow and understand for the first time. This transferring of schools often resulted in a social transformation and parents reported that their children seemed happier and had more friends once they were with other deaf children-- although they all commented on the fact that they perceived SKID to be of inferior educational quality to the normal school that their children had been attending earlier. And so to conclude, Bangalore had a variety of educational options for deaf children although most did not provide adequate education to their students.

Returning to the Family

Here I would like to turn to a discussion of a “good” family in order to further understand some of the stakes of the choices to be made around parenting and deaf education. In the summer of 2007, Manju Auntie and I sat on the large bed in her bedroom and talked about her experiences raising three deaf daughters. I had spent a lot of time at Manju Auntie’s home, located in an upper class Brahmin area in Bangalore, with her daughters and I had eaten many meals prepared by Manju Auntie. However, this was the first time that she and I had sat alone together and talked about her experiences raising deaf daughters. Manju Auntie’s daughters are now in their early to mid twenties and all three are married to normal men; the oldest and youngest are married to members of the family’s Sindhi community and the middle daughter, previously married to a Sindhi man and now divorced because this man had medical issues related to impotence, is now married to a Kannadiga. While Manju Auntie’s daughters no longer live at home, her home is still a space where her daughters and their deaf friends come to socialize and Manju Auntie is friendly and welcoming, serving drinks and fried snacks. While she does not use sign language, she prides herself on having lips that are very easy to read and she made a point to tell me that all of her daughter’s deaf friends can understand her and that she can communicate with all of them.

Manju Auntie never expected her daughters to have deaf friends or to use sign language. She was around nineteen when Sreela, her oldest daughter, was born, and living in Coimbatore with her husband and his large extended family. She realized that something was wrong with Sreela as she was not responding to sounds and so Manju Auntie took her to Mysore to the All India Institute of Speech and Hearing (AIISH) for testing. She was not encouraged to go by her in-laws who told her that Sreela would

33 Unfortunately, this often seems to be the case in both public and private schools. Public schools are under the federal government’s Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All) Act which has specific provisions mandating inclusive education for children with disabilities although I have never heard of accommodations being made for deaf children in mainstream settings. In addition at integrated schools for children with different disabilities, such as DPA’s integrated school, I observed that deaf children were often left out as teachers did not have competency in sign language.
ultimately be able to talk, “when she is five or ten;” Manju Auntie said that her in-laws did not understand what deafness was. Two years later, Dimple was born and Manju Auntie realized very quickly that Dimple was also deaf. As Manju Auntie was quite clear that she wanted an English medium education for her daughters, she was referred to the Little Flower Convent School for the Deaf in Chennai and she set off there alone with her two young daughters when they were four and two. She left her third and youngest daughter, just an infant at that time, with her husband’s brother and his family although this daughter also came to Chennai when she was old enough to start school. Manju Auntie rented a small room and spent every day at the school with her daughters, sitting in on their classes and learning techniques for teaching them how to lipread. She told me that there were so many other mothers there like her, “we were like a big family,” and that they all socialized and discussed their childrens’ progress. While she told me that this was a time of great hardship in terms of the amount of housework she was required to do and the responsibilities of caring for three deaf daughters, she also viewed this experience as rewarding because she felt that she became extremely close to her daughters. It was just the four of them and her husband came once a month to visit.

When Sreela was in fifth standard, Dimple was in third, and Anjali was in first, the school’s principal told Manju Auntie that the girls were ready to go to school with normal children. At that point, Manju Auntie and her extended family moved to Bangalore and her daughters were all enrolled in a private school in a prestigious area of Bangalore, with varying degrees of success. Sreela was chatty and warm with everyone, Dimple was stoical and removed, and Anjali was rather shy. Academically, the girls did not do very well and while Sreela was married before she finished tenth class, Dimple continued on to college and dropped out after a cousin came to Manju Auntie and told her that Dimple was crying every day and that her classmates teased her and refused to help her. Dimple then studied beauty culture and subsequently enrolled in a professional course teaching skills for working in the airline industry. Anjali continued in college and received help from the extended family in studying and preparing for exams which she passed, earning a BA with a low final score.

The turning point for Manju Auntie occurred when Dimple and her husband divorced. When Dimple was twenty, she married and then soon divorced her husband. It was after Dimple’s divorce that Manju Auntie said that she changed her parenting style and attitude. At this point, she became more open to her daughters using sign language because she saw how unhappy Dimple was. She also came to realize how isolated Dimple was as she said that Dimple and her husband had never consummated their marriage and Dimple had not realized that there was anything wrong with this: “No one had taught her about sex. How would she know that this was wrong? Finally Sreela asked Dimple why she wasn’t having any children yet and Dimple told her that her husband never touched her and so then we came to know,” Manju Auntie said. Around the time of Dimple’s divorce, the daughters met a deaf man at a wedding that they were attending and were introduced to other deaf people and to sign language. Sreela and Dimple quickly started learning sign language and became immersed in an upper middle class deaf network in Bangalore; this network was reinforced by Dimple meeting many deaf people at DPA, where she went for training soon after her divorce, and learning computers in sign language. According to Manju Auntie, this was fine with her as she just wanted her daughters to be happy.
While Manju Auntie herself did not learn to sign, she accepted the fact that her daughters wanted to do so. Dimple’s divorce made her realize the importance of sign language for her children. This is perhaps what differentiated Manju Auntie from other parents as most other parents did not accept sign language. Many parents, such as Nirmala, were adamantly against sign language. Nirmala and her daughter Sarah were also at Little Flower Convent School at the same time that Manju Auntie and her daughters were there. Sarah is the same age as Dimple and was in her class. I first met Nirmala at a DPA retreat. Nirmala occasionally volunteers at DPA because Sarah, like Dimple, attended computer courses at DPA. I introduced myself to Nirmala at the retreat and told her about my research and without provocation, she adamantly told me that she disliked sign language and strongly felt that “Deaf children should learn to speak like normals do. Why should I have to learn a new language to speak to my daughter? She should learn to speak my language. She needs to learn to participate in the society.” Nirmala’s perspective, while worded very strongly, was not new and I had heard many parents voice similar sentiments.

Yet Nirmala’s daughter Sarah started learning sign language at DPA and now she also has a small group of deaf friends with who she communicates almost exclusively in sign language, much to her mother’s dismay. When I went home with Nirmala after the DPA retreat to meet Sarah, Nirmala constantly lectured us to “speak and not sign.” However, when we tried to humor Nirmala and switched to using spoken language, our conversation dramatically slowed down and we had trouble understanding each other; neither of us could understand the other person’s speech. I had this problem constantly when interacting with deaf young adults who were raised orally and with deaf children as well-- while they were “oral,” they were often not functionally able to communicate with people beyond their immediate families-- if that. This limited scope of communication served to further isolate deaf children and prevented them from forming meaningful connections outside of their family networks.

This is true for Manju Auntie’s youngest daughter Anjali who chose not to learn sign language as she said that she found it “dirty.” She told me that she did not want, or need, to learn sign language and it became clear to me that she judged her two sisters for choosing to learn it as after all, she proclaimed, they could speak. However I noticed that unlike her sisters, Anjali had no social networks of her own. When I asked her who her friends were, she named her sisters’ friends as her own although during social functions and events it was clear that she had difficulty communicating with everyone, including hearing family members. Anjali tended to spend more time with Manju Auntie’s brother-in-law and his wife, the same people who had looked after her while Manju Auntie was living in Chennai with Sreela and Dimple, and they were adamantly opposed to sign

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34 It is also possible that the shame of Dimple’s divorce opened Manju Auntie up to other forms of shame--the shame of her daughters visibly signing in public and therefore being marked as deaf.

35 According to Sreela Bose, the deaf educator and NGO project manager I mentioned earlier, Sarah’s decision to learn sign language is not unique. She told me that she found that many deaf young adults choose to learn sign language in adulthood as they feel increasingly isolated at home and they no longer keep in touch with normal friends from school. In contrast, when they meet deaf sign language users, they feel a sense of comfort and familiarity.
Learning Sign Language and Learning to Critique the Family

As I will discuss in the next chapter, most of my interlocutors formally started learning sign language after finishing class ten and attending vocational training programs which were explicitly taught in sign language. This does not mean that deaf children were not signing before this. Deaf children constantly learned sign language from each other, from older deaf role models who graduated from their schools and returned for social events, visiting missionaries and college students from the United States and elsewhere, and occasionally from deaf parents. I argue that a shift happens when deaf young adults finish class ten and enter vocational training programs or higher education programs where sign language is explicitly and specifically taught and utilized as a medium of instruction. Sign language is often taught by deaf teachers who have received training at the National Institute of Hearing Handicapped (such programs are discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight) and these teachers come to function as deaf role models and as harbingers of other kinds of deaf ways of being in the world (as a teacher, as a sign language user).

Learning sign language is never about only learning a language, it is also a process of coming to see it as a legitimate and valuable language in and of itself. More specifically, learning sign language requires a re-orientation through which learners come to see sign language as a language that is uniquely suited to the needs of deaf people and expressive of deaf ways of being in the world. I argue throughout this dissertation that learning sign language involves, following Frank Bechter (2008), a process of conversion whereby deaf people convert to deaf sociality. Learning sign language is also marked by taking a deaf turn whereby deaf young adults become increasingly oriented towards other deaf people and towards deaf sociality in general. Learning sign language is therefore a process of becoming...and it is a process of becoming different from ones family and other normal people.

The National Institute of Hearing Handicapped’s (NIHH) sign language curriculum, which is used in sign language classes all over India, begins its course curriculum with information about numbers and history of deaf people living in India, deaf culture, and the importance of sign language for deaf people. As such, first time learners learn that deaf people are a linguistic minority and that sign language is deaf peoples’ language from the very beginning of the course. More important than this, however, is the actual structure of sign language classes, how things are taught, and by who. In observing sign language classes at DPA, ISH, and SKID in Bangalore and at Delhi Deaf Women’s League and at the Deaf Empowerment Training Center in Delhi, I noted that teachers were often young, familiar, and collaborative with their students and they therefore subverted the structure of the typical classroom (see Chapter Eight for

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36 Anjali’s perspective on sign language was not unique and many young adults who were raised orally told me similar things although they did not use words like “dirty.” Rather they talked about how deaf people should learn to speak so that they could participate within and contribute to society. It was not surprising that they felt this way: young adults who had participated in oral early intervention programs and schools told me about being forced to keep their hands behind their back and not being allowed to socialize with other deaf children after school. It should be noted too that these (successfully) raised orally tended to be upper class and caste young adults and adults.
more on this). In classes, I watched teachers teach hand shapes, the alphabet, grammar, and signs. I also watched teachers teach students the importance of introducing oneself to other deaf people by including the fact that one is deaf or hearing in the introduction and I observed teachers introducing other norms in deaf moral worlds such as the importance of sharing ones’ autobiography in relation to the deaf world (where one has gone to school, deaf clubs that one is a part of, whether parents, spouses, and siblings are hearing or deaf). One of the first things that people learn in sign language class is how to pose the question: “Are you deaf or are you normal?” thereby foregrounding what is important in deaf worlds.

In observing students learn how to sign this question, and the correct answer, ME-DEAF or “I am deaf,” and in observing students learning sign language in general, I became increasingly aware of how learning sign language served to shift the ways that deaf young adults understood what it meant to be deaf. Not only did sign language increase the social capital of deaf signers (we have our own language) and make communication less difficult between deaf people, it also legitimated deaf experiences. This legitimacy was in relation to the other answer to the question, “I am normal,” which was the de-facto wrong answer. Learning the importance of asking people if they are deaf or normal when one first meets them serves to constantly produce and reproduce “deaf” and “normal” as two different experiences of being in the world. And the implication was that normal people do not have the experience of valuing and desiring sign language in the same way that deaf people do.

And so as deaf young adults learned sign language and its value, many became increasingly dissatisfied with their parents and families who did not sign. Their inability to communicate with their parents was contrasted and juxtaposed with the ease of communicating with other deaf people. This communication lack became something that was openly discussed and commented on. Deaf young adults often complained about the fact that their parents did not or would not learn sign language and that they were forced to communicate using speech or gestures at home. As I mentioned at the very start of this chapter, my interlocutors often said that their parents did not share any information with them and that they were excluded from family discussions. These feelings and sentiments increased as deaf young adults participated in deaf spaces and settings that were full of communication because they provided a comparison. In these deaf spaces, deaf young adults also learned the language and the discourse for critiquing their normal families for not including them—“They don’t teach me anything” and “They don’t share anything with me.” While most of my interlocutors told me that they always had a strong bond with other deaf people and that they always had a sense of being excluded in family life, formally learning sign language (together with other deaf people) served to cement this bond and produce even further a sense of one’s exclusion at home. Learning sign language provided both the actual language and the discourse to articulate this.

Spaces of Young Adulthood (and Turning Them into Deaf Spaces)

There is also something be said for the transition from childhood to adulthood and the specific spaces that young adults circulate through. Previously as deaf children, my interlocutors would go from home to school and vice versa without any detours. When they were young, perhaps up to age thirteen, deaf children were dropped off and picked up from school by parents, private bus, or some kind of shared rickshaw arrangement. As
they entered more advanced grades, many of my interlocutors were allowed to commute alone on public buses although they were expected to head immediately home after school. However as young adults, deaf students, especially male students, were given more independence and they were therefore (occasionally) allowed to circulate in and between other spaces besides school and home with deaf friends. And there were many such spaces to spend time in: vocational training centers which provided training to deaf young adults (Chapter Three), deaf churches (Chapter Five), the occasional deaf Hare Krishna event, the almost weekly multi-level marketing events directed at deaf people (Chapter Six), a once monthly deaf association meeting, informal (and mostly middle and upper class) deaf coffee hang outs at one of Bangalore’s many hip coffee shops, and then there were chance meetings on bus platforms where deafs would linger after running into each other, chatting as busses went by.

My interlocutors frequently told me that these were spaces of learning and development and they were also spaces of socializing, of exchanging and sharing information and news, and just passing time. And being present in these spaces was frequently juxtaposed with being bored at home. I would often ask people why they had come to a specific function and the reply would be: “It’s better than at home. It’s boring at home. I have no one to talk to there.” or “I do not learn anything at home.” While non-deaf young adults may and do often say the same thing, I argue that the stakes for normal young adults is different as they have other possibilities at home: reading a newspaper, watching the news, or a chat with a family friend or neighbor. Deaf people cannot do this as easily: access to news and conversation cannot be taken for granted. This was made evident to me by listening to parents complain that their child spent all her time at home sending text messages to other deaf friends. When I asked about this, deaf young adults told me that they desired news and interaction and that they were not getting this at home.

In returning to the question and the lament of Sarnath’s mother whom I discussed earlier: “Why does [my son] need this sign language?” and “We used to be so close then;” it seems clear to me what the answer to the question is—Sarnath needed sign language in order to communicate with other deaf people and to become oriented towards deaf sociality. In actuality, Sarnath started learning sign language quite early as he attended SKID where he used sign language to communicate with his peers. However, there was something about how Sarnath comported himself now that he was in his twenties that was so alarming to his mother. She saw him socializing with mostly deaf peers, spending time with deaf women, and desiring a deaf wife. Sarnath attended two international deaf leadership camps and brought home deaf Americans from this camp as well as deaf foreign travelers whom he met over Facebook and other social networking sites. To her, these actions and desires were a rejection of the familial past, which was characterized by her sense of closeness to her son developed through daily routines of going to and from school together, and the imagined familial future in which Sarnath would be a loyal son who married a normal Brahmin girl.

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37 Any kind of traveling between school and home offered opportunities for encounters with other deaf people. A few of my interlocutors told me stories about meeting missionaries who strategically positioned themselves outside the gates of the schools at the time when school was finished for the day. The missionaries would quickly talk to them before they got onto their buses to head home. Traveling by public transit also afforded opportunities for meeting deaf students from other schools and older deaf people heading to and from work.
Conclusion
In conclusion, this chapter has been my attempt to shed light on the relationships between deaf children and their families specifically around matters of communication and educational development. In attempting to create a broad and general picture, I am confident that I have missed nuances and fraught dynamics. I have not written about the complicated dance that many deaf young adults and their families often engage in to try to make things work at home, about the concerned glances that mothers often bestow on their deaf sons as they worry about how their child will make a living or provide for themselves after they are gone, or about the ways that some deaf children and young adults are often “spoiled” by their parents who insist that they do not have to help with the housework, contribute to household expenses, or hold down a job.

I have also not written about the sense of shame that many parents, especially mothers, feel for having a deaf child and which permeates many households, not quite always visible but not invisible either. And I do not talk about the sacrifices that many parents make for their deaf children: they move to other cities for better educational opportunities, they permit their children to attend religious services that they would never set a foot in themselves (Chapter Five), and they encourage their children to join multi-level marketing schemes which they find morally problematic for themselves (Chapter Six). In response, I argue that this is not an ethnography of families with deaf children or deaf families but rather it is an attempt to render visible the often invisible experiences and perspectives of deaf young adults themselves.

38 Following Das (2001) and Das and Addlakha (2001), I do see the domestic as the space where shame is negotiated and collectively experienced by multiple and connected body selves.
Chapter Three: Invisible and Visible Training

Trying to Learn

Chetan is a deaf government worker with excellent sign language and English skills who volunteers at the Disabled Peoples Association (DPA) on Saturdays as an English and sign language teacher in his desire to be a role model for younger deafs. Soon after meeting him, Chetan told me about the first day of his class with DPA’s new batch of deaf trainees. As part of this first lesson he introduced himself by following a norm within deaf sociality in both this particular deaf milieu and elsewhere. He shared a short autobiography in which he identified himself as a deaf person, shared where he went to school, whether he passed his secondary school leaving certificate (SSLC), his higher education qualifications, his current employment position, and his marital status. He positioned this autobiography as a deaf one by stressing that he attended a deaf school and that his wife and daughter are deaf. He then asked the trainees to do the same and one by one they went around and introduced themselves using the sign language words and communication structure to which Chetan had just introduced them. According to Chetan, almost all of the twenty plus students in the room told him that they had copied on their SSLC exam and that this is how they had received their certificates.

Copying on this exam is a part of deaf educational experience throughout India and it is a deaf social fact. I was matter of factly told stories of such copying and passing by many of my interlocutors. In most cases teachers came into the exam room and gave them the answers and in some cases, families pooled funds and paid bribes to examiners and bureaucrats to ensure that their children passed. In Bangalore, there is an NGO whose director specializes in arranging for deaf people who have failed the exam multiple times to take it again and pass; he arranges press coverage and Bangalore newspapers feature inspirational stories of deaf housewives going off to take the SSLC exam for the fourth or fifth time, but this time they actually pass (thanks to the director who provides the deaf test takers with access to answer sheets). I want to note that deafs talk about copying and not cheating. There is no shame around copying as what else is there to do? It is part of the shared experience of not-learning for deaf students within India’s deaf education system.

As I noted in Chapter Two, deaf education in India in India has been a failure. Schools are almost exclusively oral in ideology (although students often sign in between and after classes). The oral method is highly contested and does not work for all deaf

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39 Chetan’s command of English language skills were rare among deafs in India. Thanks to his older sister who tutored him and the education that he received at the Sheila Kothavala Institute for the Deaf (SKID), a deaf school that began in Bangalore in the late 1960s with the assistance of sisters from the Little Flower Convent, he mastered English grammar and structure. He is incredibly proud of this and told me again and again that other deafs looked up to him and all of the NGOs and training centers wanted him to teach their deaf students (although they did not necessarily want to pay him to do this).

40 Throughout this chapter I use the terms trainee, candidate, and student interchangeably. The organizations at which I conducted research used all three terms. Similarly, teachers were called teachers, instructors, and trainers. I also use the terms vocational training center, NGO, and job placement center interchangeably as well unless I am specifically writing about an industrial training center which follows national government curriculums and offers government certification.

children (Werner 1994). In addition, children are not provided with appropriate amplification (in the form of hearing aids) to make use of oral education nor are they provided with teachers with adequate training (Antia 1979, Broota 2005, Rehabilitation Council of India 2007, World Bank 2007). The Indian government, through the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), is only now starting to explore introducing sign language into deaf education. Previously, the government had not recognized or invested resources into Indian Sign Language. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), which oversees and accredits the development of special education teachers’ curriculum, only expressed interest in 2009 in conducting research on Indian Sign Language and including sign language training within teachers’ curriculums. However, from what I have been told by both RCI’s secretary and the former national disability commissioner, teachers will only have fifteen days of sign language instruction, not at all enough time for them to establish fluency.

Broota (2005) writes in her report on the current issues facing deaf people in India:

“...it seems that oralism has left the majority of deaf people in the country without adequate modes of communication and education. If, for years, the auditory--verbal approach to communication has been followed and is claimed to be successful, then why do we not see graduates, doctors, engineers, civil servants, architects, lawyers who have hearing impairment?...why don’t we see deaf children in colleges?” (Broota 2005, 6).

With this quote, Broota brings us to the heart of the matter: deaf children are not learning from their teachers in schools nor are they acquiring essential language skills. In interviews with advocates working to improve the education system for deaf children, I was told time and time again that deaf children often finish school without access to language development and that even teachers themselves do not realize the relationship between deafness, education, and language development. And so what happens when deaf children “pass” their SSLC without learning? What happens when they transition from childhood to young adulthood?  

As a result of state and private interventions, there are an increasing array of options available to deaf young adults, especially those living in South India, where a few higher education institutions for the deaf have emerged in Chennai and Madurai in Tamil Nadu, and Mysore in Karnataka. With the exception of JSS Polytechnic for the Physically Handicapped (JSSPPH) Mysore where students receive diplomas after completing three years of education, the others offer bachelors degrees. However, as with primary and secondary education, in the majority of cases teachers do not use sign language and students complain that they do not understand and so they copy and learn from each other or more advanced classmates. The numbers of deaf students pursuing higher education is miniscule at about 0.9% of the known 307,600 deaf children in India (Rehabilitation Council of India 2007).

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42 It is important to note that there are deaf children who emerge from school as fluent signers if they have access to sign language using deaf peers, mentors, and/or family members.
43 According to RCI, these numbers are estimated from the 2001 census and are most likely inaccurate.
As such, vocational training is a key site for educating (and “rehabilitating”) deaf young adults and the national government has required that government Industrial Training Institutes (ITI) offer a one percent quota to deaf students. It is important to note that both national and state governments have supported vocational training and that the number of government and private vocational training centers, and students enrolled in them, has increased significantly. Few deaf young adults choose to attend mainstream or normal vocational training programs and instead they flock to where other deaf young adults are— at programs offered by disability-focused organizations and NGOs.

As vocational training focuses on manual and applied training, it is possible to ignore deaf young adults’ educational deficits and focus on imparting “technical” skills: more specifically fitting/welding and electronics, and increasingly over the past eight years, basic computer skills. According to Janani Bharath, a community based rehabilitation and deaf education expert living in Bangalore, the problems that deaf young adults face are more difficult to ignore than the problems of deaf children. She writes:

“The child deprived of even a basic education having severely limited language and communication skills grows up without being able to get any kind of employment (unless its manual labour). This problem then becomes a very glaring problem and much more obvious than the problems of the deaf child.” (email from Janani Bharath).

Bharath pointed out that a focus on vocational training for deaf young adults was like “fighting fires or damage control” and that it was easier to find vocational training teachers than deaf education specialists. It was perhaps easier to build and develop successful vocational programs than successful deaf education programs. All of this leads me to stress that vocational training is a critical space for deaf young adults-- another opportunity to learn something. However, as I discuss within this chapter, these vocational training centers and NGOs are not specifically designed for deaf young adults. These spaces are therefore what I would call unintended deaf spaces in that they have not been designed with sign language using deaf young adults in mind and most administrators are unaware of the specific needs and desires of deaf people. These

44 Vocational training, training that students enroll in after finishing class ten/SSLC is not just important for deaf students but has been seen as crucial program for creating skilled laborers for India in general. However, over the past ten years or so, there have been critiques of the current structure of providing such education (International Labor Organization 2003, World Bank 2008). According to a 2008 World Bank report, there were 10,000 students enrolled in vocational training in the 1950s and this number has increased to more than 700,000 students now enrolled in 5,253 public and private institutions. This World Bank report noted that sixty percent of students were still unemployed within three years after finishing their vocational training course, there was not enough government oversight of private programs, and there were also ambiguous and competing government certification schemes. In addition, education provided was deemed to be too narrow in focus and there was not enough connection between actual industries and the vocational training centers. These factors combined with a general decrease in industrial sectors have resulted in increasing unemployment.

45 For example, one NGO director refused to permit a celebration or program for International Deaf Week as he said that deaf people should not be singled out or treated differently from other disabled people. Similarly, another NGO’s director encouraged deaf trainees to write on individual white boards that she provided them with instead of using sign language as “[I]n the future they will be in the normal world
spaces were often designed to provide services and training to people with disabilities in general and not deaf people specifically. As it is easier to build ramps and facilities for people with physical disabilities, the specific, and less obvious, needs of deaf people for communication access were overshadowed and not planned for. Yet, as the numbers of people with physical disabilities declined due to lower polio incidence rates, and as deaf people are mobile and can easily physically traverse the city, deaf students have increasingly been tapped into as a source of needed bodies, and numbers, with which to fill training programs.\(^{46}\)

**Unintended Deaf Space is Created through Deaf Sociality and Desiring Deaf Development**

As I noted, most of the trainers and administrators involved in such training programs do not sign nor do they understand the needs of deaf students. As such, deaf young adults often produce, learn within, and derive meaning from these spaces in ways unintended and unplanned by their founders and administrators. Those who administered and taught at these training centers and NGOs desired, as one NGO director told me, to create responsible and productive deaf workers who “would be integrated into the mainstream and be productive and contributing members of society.” While deaf young adults did occasionally learn how to be responsible and productive workers, this chapter is mostly about the other things that deaf young adults learned, unbeknownst to these administrators and teachers. They learned from each other how to be oriented towards others like them and how to participate within deaf sociality. They learned deaf norms such as sharing information and helping each other and they created moral spaces for discussing both present day problems and ideas for the future with each other and with deaf teachers and role models who came to visit or teach.

While these training spaces, at least for deaf attendees, came to take on deaf forms and structures of their own, I do not mean to imply that these are spaces of resistance. To the contrary, deaf young adults made no claims against these spaces nor did they actively attempt to reorder or change them to make them more representative of the needs and desires of deaf people.\(^{47}\) And so program administrators and teachers were unaware of how deaf young adults used these spaces and often complained to me that they saw their deaf students as “lazy,” “pampered,” “immature,” “emotional and prone to gossiping,” and “not capable of making good decisions.” There was often tension between administrators and teachers on one hand and deaf trainees on the other. This chapter is about this tension.

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\(^{46}\) This is true in other kinds of educational institutions as well. For example, JSS Polytechnic for the Physically Disabled in Mysore used to have a population that was around ninety percent students with physical disabilities. Currently, the majority of its students are deaf. Yet teachers still do not sign.

\(^{47}\) Here I am reminded of Tom Boellstorff’s (2005) discussion about the places where gay men in Indonesia met. Boellstorff uses de Certeau’s (1984) distinction between tactics and strategies in analyzing how gay men utilize space. According to Boellstorff, gay men utilize tactics and not strategies as strategies are “formed through the hegemonic power to set the geographic terms of discussion” while tactics are the tools “that lack this power and thus both institutionalization and control over place;” tactics “belong to the other” (Boellstorff 2005, 129). Similarly, deaf young adults circulating through the spaces of vocational training centers use tactics in their attempts to make these spaces relevant and useable.
In my discussion of unintended deaf space, I am inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991) on how space is produced contingently and relationally. According to Lefebvre, produced space cannot be understood by analyzing the object itself but only through a study of the relations of production and social relations of reproduction (Lefebvre 1991, 312). Lefebvre writes: “I shall show how space serves, and how hegemony makes use of it, in the establishment, on the basis of an underlying logic and with the help of knowledge and technical expertise, of a “system”” (Lefebvre 1991, 11). In this chapter, I ask what kinds of spatial hegemonies are produced and reproduced at these vocational training centers and to what ends. While physically these spaces may be “accessible” for people with disabilities in that they have ramps or modified bathrooms, they are not spatially or socially designed for deaf people. For example, in addition to the obvious lack of sign language, classrooms are set up in rows with teachers standing in front of windows. As such deaf students often cannot see each other nor can they see their teachers because they are drowned out by light from the windows. This “system” is therefore not designed to meet the needs of deaf students.

As such, I ask the following questions: What kind of training centers are NGO administrators trying to create? What kind of deaf productive subjects are they hoping to train? How and why do deaf young adults circulate between various training centers? And finally, what kinds of desires, values, hopes for the future, and everyday orientations emerge for deaf young adults? I contend that it is important to think about how the everyday inhabited spaces of deaf young adults exist relationally and contingently with the spaces as conceived by administrators, teachers, and trainers and with deaf trainees’ own visions of how (deaf) spaces should be produced-- and that this is a source of productive and interesting tension for the researcher. More broadly, I am interested in understanding the social, political, and economic stakes of what it means to be a deaf young adult circulating between vocational training centers in this current moment in urban India.

In this chapter, I pay close attention to and track the ways that deaf young adults utilize three particular Bangalore based vocational training centers and placement organizations. While these were not the only three vocational training centers in Bangalore, they were the ones with the highest deaf enrollment and they often overlapped in kinds of training and the specific students served. In writing this chapter, I am inspired by the comment of a deaf woman in her late thirties in Delhi who told me that she had spent eight years circulating between different vocational training programs after she finished her SSLC. When I expressed surprise at the wide variety of different skills she had learned, including beauty culture, typing, batik, and food preparation, she responded: “In all places I learn.” I contend that what she meant is “I am always trying to learn.” For this woman, and for most of the deafs with whom I worked during my field work, a desire to learn was evident along with a desire to understand. As a result of structural inequalities which privilege and value normal ways of learning and being in the world, learning and understanding were never taken for granted by my deaf interlocutors; socialities (and worlds) were created out of shared experiences of understanding and not-
understanding, learning and not-learning, negotiations around information sharing and exchange, and envisioning and preparing for the future. These socialities were above all oriented towards desiring, and hoping for, deaf development.

Deaf development is a major theme that runs through this chapter as it is a dominant discourse within vocational training centers which deaf young adults invoke when they talk both about the present (which is characterized by the absence of deaf development) and the future (which will hopefully have opportunities for deaf development). Talking about deaf development is both a social critique and it embeds deaf people into specific kinds of social relationships with each other and with normals; it creates local moral worlds (Kleinman 1999). According to trainees, deaf development will happen when there are deaf schools with teachers who use sign language, when deaf people are able to communicate more easily in sign language and English, and when there are better job opportunities and possibilities for deaf people. Institutions run for and by deaf people are also considered to be a sign of deaf development. For my interlocutors, deaf development will happen when DEAF NORMAL EQUAL or “deafs are equal to normals.” Through the lens of deaf development, relationships with other deafs are about feelings of sameness (we all desire deaf development) while relationships with normals are about feelings of inferiority and not being understood or valued. (See Pigg 1992 for more on development and underdevelopment produced as social relationships.) Deaf development is the development of deaf-centered, and therefore sign language centered, structures and institutions which will help deaf people develop language, educational, and moral skills themselves for living in the world.

**Welding versus Computers… Yet Who really Understands Either?/The Seeming Injustice of Placing the Welding Classroom Next to the Computer Room.**

Shortly after I arrived in Bangalore in August 2009, the Disabled Peoples Association (DPA) started its new batches of vocational training courses for the year. Deaf students enrolled in either fitting/welding, electronics, or computer classes. Throughout the first few weeks of September, a steady stream of new students came in with their parents and other relatives to register for courses. They arrived clutching folders containing secondary school leaving certificates (SSLCs), disability certificates, and report cards. Upon registration, they were asked which course they wanted to enroll in and many of them said that they did not know and deferred to either their family member or the DPA staff person doing the intake process. Depending on who this intake person was, they received different recommendations.

The head of the computer course was an aggressive marketer for her program and she was quite keen on recruiting as many students with good English skills as possible. As a result many of the deaf students who grew up in Bangalore and studied in English medium schools joined the one-year basic computer course. Due to lack of English skills, many rural families were not encouraged to place their child in the computer course, and besides these families were often more impressed by the government certificate provided with successful passing of the government electronics and welding exams as well as the perceived practical nature of these skills. Parents of female students also saw these certificates as potential forms of capital to leverage in finding a marriage partner for their

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49 Fitting and welding are used interchangeably here. There were also tailoring and prosthetic making classes but these were not popular as they were seen as not offering much income potential.
daughter—although there was also lingering anxiety about these industrial training fields as being “unclean” or “unfeminine.”

As classes started and students entered into routines—computer students familiarized themselves with computers, electronics students started learning about circuits and wires, and fitting students began experimenting with drafting, drilling, and different welding techniques—I noticed that many of the fitting students repeatedly went to Radhika, the principal of DPA’s industrial training center, and asked to be switched to the computer course. They told her that the computer course was better, easier, and that they would find a job more easily afterwards. And I observed students talking about how they had learned from other deafs that they would only be able to get manual labor jobs once they finished their fitting/welding training. Within these conversations there was constant speculation about what the future would hold and the relationship between their current training and the future. While this was not specifically articulated, these conversations reflected anxieties about the status of vocations such as fitting in light of the shrinking of the public sector and the emergence of the new information technology sector in India.

There were also some very immediate bodily concerns. Whenever I asked fitting students how they were, they invariably always replied that they felt tired, their legs hurt, or their knees and backs were in pain from standing and manipulating metal most of the day. It seemed to me that these discussions of physical ailments were also ways of sharing anxieties about this training in relation to other possible trainings (such as computer training) and these conversations served as conduits of creating interpersonal and collective experiences (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991). It also did not help that the welding classroom was located right next the computer classroom where students were seated all of the time and looked more comfortable, I thought.

On one occasion, I sat with Radhika while she talked to two students who wanted to switch to the computer course because other deafs had told them to. She advised them that they should stick with welding because they would receive a government certificate after completing the course and passing an exam. She told them: “While you might be tired now, your future will be good. You will get a government certificate, then a government job, and then a good future.” She continued by telling them possible jobs that they might be able to have such as working for the Indian Railway and she said that there would always be a demand for train tracks. The students did not ask her any questions and it seemed that they were not interested in the details about the government certificates or future jobs. These students had made up their mind through talking amongst themselves and to other deaf friends elsewhere that computers were better. Much to Radhika’s frustration, these two students would soon quit the fitting program and a few months later I would see them at another NGO providing training and placement services looking for both computer training and a part-time job as a barista at a Café Coffee Day, a bright and gleaming new coffee chain with a funky young atmosphere. Khaki uniforms and aching backs were no match for the allure of computers

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50 At one point the welding teacher, in his first month of teaching at DPA, was so amazed and confounded by the constant complaining (which he had never witnessed before when he worked elsewhere) that he approached Radhika and asked her if there was a connection between deafness and bodily weakness.
and fancy coffee chains.\textsuperscript{51} My point in narrating this story is to illustrate the pervasive power of deaf-deaf communication and the privileging of deaf perspectives over normal ones. Radhika often lamented to me that she felt that deafs never listened to her, that they only listened to, and trusted, each other. She often seemed to be fighting a losing battle against deaf communicative networks.\textsuperscript{52} This story also illustrates the anxieties and tensions surrounding different notions and ideas of the future. Is it better to work in the public sector or to work for a private company?

Radhika had worked at DPA for almost twelve years at that point and she had come from an industrial training and electrical engineering background herself. She strongly believed that the fitting course provided the best options for deafs’ futures as they would get a government certificate, then they could do an apprenticeship at Bharat Earth Movers Limited (BEML) or Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), and then hopefully they would then get a “safe” government job with a good salary. However, this rarely happened as students struggled to pass their exams. Even when they succeeded in gaining admission to apprenticeships, they were unable to get permanent jobs, and so they moved on to lower paying and less stable private companies. In many cases they did not get these government jobs because the one percent public sector quota available to deaf workers (to be discussed in Chapter Four) was already saturated with older deaf workers who had not yet retired. As one of the leaders of the Pan Indian Deaf League (PIDL) in Delhi told me: “The glass is full.” It is extremely rare to see a deaf man below the age of thirty five to forty with a laminated government industry identification card. However for someone like Radhika who has spent the last twelve years working in the industrial training center, it was difficult to imagine other kinds of futures and professions.

In some ways, DPA, with its large and under-utilized industrial training center, is a relic of the past (although it still manages to remain salient). Located in a fast growing area of Bangalore that used to be considered the outskirts but is now closer to its ever-expanding center, DPA is a cheerful enclave of gardens and low buildings with a cavernous training center that feels like an airplane hangar, complete with a tin roof. DPA began in 1959 as a sheltered workshop where people with physical disabilities made machine parts. An affluent family with a polio-affected daughter started the organization in the garage attached to their bungalow in one of Bangalore’s oldest neighborhoods. Due to this young woman’s diligence and influential connections, DPA grew rapidly and over the years it started a full-scale industrial training center, a self-contained manufacturing unit supplying parts to government industries, a primary school for disabled children, community based rehabilitation (CBR) programs, horticulture training, and community health workshops.\textsuperscript{53} The computer training program only started in the last ten years. As polio incidence rates have declined over the years and as access to physical therapy and

\textsuperscript{51} These coffee chain jobs also had uniforms, perhaps no less debasing. Instead of a khaki uniform, Café Coffee Day workers wore striped red and white button down shirts, vests, and black pants.

\textsuperscript{52} Radhika was not the only person who talked to me about this. I heard this as well from other administrators, teachers, and family members. This privileging of deaf perspectives over normal ones has been written about in Deaf Studies literature (e.g., Mindess 2006).

\textsuperscript{53} These connections were initially domestic ones and then as DPA grew, international connections with disability service organizations, schools, and banking institutions were formed. Today DPA depends on a combination of donations from Indian nationals, international funders including sources as diverse as schools and banks, and multinational corporations operating in India.
mobility aids have improved, DPA found itself with a declining student population for its industrial training center-- until DPA was approached by deaf students finishing class ten at a local deaf school in 2002. Radhika was an electronics teacher at that time and when she was approached by a family with a deaf child, Aruna, she agreed to learn sign language. Aruna taught her sign language and the importance of ensuring that deaf students could follow and understand.54

Through word of mouth deaf students began flocking to DPA and Radhika became increasingly committed to learning sign language and teaching deaf students. She taught the other fitting and electronics teachers sign language and as the numbers of deaf students grew, DPA instituted an informal policy under which all new students were required to learn sign language, normal and deaf alike, in order to introduce an “inclusive” atmosphere (although in practice most normal students were not so motivated to learn sign language). This policy has resulted in some tension, as the rather matriarchal founder believes strongly that DPA should prioritize people with physical disabilities and she told me that she feels that deaf people are taking over the space. There is also tension for other reasons: deaf students, who are now the majority, feel that their hearing teachers do not sign well enough and in some cases they do not sign at all.55 Students were often frustrated because teachers were required to perform multiple administrative and teaching roles and so, as students pointed out, they often only taught “half half half.” Students often spent time sitting in classrooms, copying notes from each other, and trying to make sense of what they were supposed to be learning.

One of the most interesting and powerful things about DPA is that it provided both a socialization and language learning space for deaf students who had not learned sign language formally before as a result of attending oral method schools. That is, it provided a space for becoming part of a deaf sociality created through shared learning and use of sign language. Before the actual vocational training courses began, Radhika and Purnima, one of Radhika’s first deaf students who had stayed on at DPA after failing to find an electronics job, taught a foundation course to all new students in which they taught sign language, English, and basic math skills. In addition, Chetan, a well-respected deaf man, came to DPA every Saturday to teach both English and sign language. Deaf students from Bangalore, villages in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, and their normal counterparts learned basic sign language and experimented with new ways of communicating with each other. I constantly saw students practicing new words and language structures. Language was never taken for granted by DPA’s deaf students as they were all at different stages of language learning and development. Language learning and sociality formation went hand in hand as students spent time together, practiced language, and learned about each other.

In some cases, as I noted earlier, teachers did not sign at all and students sat blankly and quietly not understanding-- a throwback to their school days. And some times students did understand-- but their understandings were not accurate. An example of this occurred during a social studies lesson. A normal student asked the teacher (who did not know any sign language) if the world was going to end in 2012 because she said

54 There were deaf students who studied at DPA prior to this time although none of the teachers knew sign language and so these students learned by watching the practical demonstrations and struggling to read notes.
55 Due to retention issues almost every year a new teacher needs to be taught sign language.
that she had seen this discussed on television recently. The teacher wrote what she had asked on the board and then went on to tell her that this was was not going to happen. However, the deaf students only saw what the teacher had written and so they thought that the teacher had said that the world was going to end! Two students approached me and asked if the world would end in 2012. This particular miscommunication, and miscommunications in general, were compounded by deaf attempts to fill in the gap, make sense of what they were seeing and hearing, or interpret for other deafs. There was always the danger of wrong interpretation or inaccurate filling in of the gaps. However, deafs were enthusiastic to help each other and share information. The person who possesses information is morally required to share it with other deafs. Information here functions as both social glue and social capital. And sharing information also contributes to deaf development.

A common lament uttered by students at DPA was that they were bored, they did not understand their teachers, they understood only “half half half,” and that they were not learning. These shared feelings-- about boredom, understanding, and learning-- and talking about them, produced a social space of not-understanding and not-learning among students and so they became increasingly oriented towards each other through sharing information and thoughts from both everyday life (what one has brought for lunch, a fight that someone had with her mother last night, the festival coming up next week, and so on) and a desire for an accessible present and future (“if only Chetan could teach everyday;” “if only my mother and sisters knew sign language;” “the social studies teacher should know how to communicate with us;” and “I wish deaf schools were better.”). Students constantly told me that in the future, deaf people would be able to develop: education would be better and deaf people would have better opportunities.

Whenever I asked trainees what they thought about their trainings or an inaccessible lecture or program that we had attended together, they told me that they did not understand but “things in the future will be better.” The future was therefore seen as being marked by progress. Hopes were deferred onto this future and talking about the future was a way to critique the present. The concept of deaf development was often used as a lament or commentary on perceived lack: deaf people in India generally and overwhelmingly do not have access to good education and so they cannot get good jobs. Deaf people are therefore not developed. Deaf development here meant that deaf young adults would have access to better opportunities to learn language and skills-- in the future. This development is yet to come although it is not clear when it will come and it is not talked about as happening either in the present or the near future (Guyer 2007). Yet deafs were patient as they waited for this future and they had strong convictions that it would come.

How did these students come to have ideas of a better future? In his classes, Chetan often talked to the students about concepts such as deaf rights and deaf culture and he told stories about deaf schools and colleges in America, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere where teachers and students all used sign language. He told deaf students that sign language was their mother tongue, that they had their own culture, and that they should not be discriminated against because they were deaf or used sign language. He told his students about things that he had learned about from international friends such as sign language interpreters, special phones called text telephone devices, and videophones and video relay services through which deafs could directly sign to each other or to
interpreters who would then talk to normal people on the other end. As a result of his excellent English and sign language skills (in Indian Sign Language, International Sign, and American Sign Language) and his curiosity about deaf people around the world, Chetan had contact with deaf individuals and organizations all over India and throughout the world.\footnote{Chetan learned his excellent American Sign Language skills as a result of the role of American and Canadian missionaries in his life when he was growing up.}

In the summer of 2007, Chetan helped coordinate the visit of a group of eight deaf American students who came to Bangalore for a “deaf empowerment program.” Many of the deaf DPA students met these deaf Americans and saw their presentations about deaf life in America. These presentations were very much framed in terms of deaf “heaven” in relation to India’s deaf “hell.”\footnote{My conception of deaf heavens and hells borrows from, and is inspired by, Eunjung Kim’s (2011) theorization around disability heaven and hell. She argues that disability activists and development workers in the first world utilize and produce ideas of disability hells in order to justify interventions.} And so for Chetan and these deaf students, experiences of being deaf in India involve living within a temporal moment of “the not yet” through which the future is mapped against a Western present. Hopes and dreams for the future are oriented towards having similar levels of access and possibilities that deafs in the West are imagined to have. Deaf Indians see themselves as inferior and underdeveloped in relation to Western deafs. Deaf development is clearly seen as social mobility along an already ordained path. (Also see Friedner 2008)\footnote{I must note that while these particular deafs desired western services, technologies, and access features, they did not adopt discourses around deaf rights, deaf culture, or the notion that deaf people are a linguistic minority. In Chapter Seven, I provide an analysis of a New Delhi based social movement that specifically uses the discourse of rights.}.

In their pursuit of better futures and their desire to develop themselves, students were quite strategic in aligning themselves with other students who they thought could “help” them. Sharing knowledge and skills was often mentioned as an exchange: “you teach me English and I will teach you math.” Students often told me that they chose to be friends with particular deafs because these deafs had good English skills or they could help them in the future because they were “smart” or “brilliant.” Indeed, knowledge sharing was often a contested site as on one hand, students were inclined to help each other because of feelings of shared responsibility (and shared boredom), but on the other hand, students were strategic in their negotiations around exchanging knowledge and they expressed desire to learn from, and spend time with, deafs who they thought were more developed. As students came from a diversity of backgrounds and life experiences, they were constantly assessing each other and trying to figure out possible beneficial exchanges. While there were often negotiations over who to help and who to seek help from, I argue that the overriding desire for deaf development meant that despite being strategic, deafs more often helped each other than not.

In other cases, students embarked together on knowledge accumulating projects in which they struggled collectively to figure out the “right way to act” and what was “good or bad.” Female students collectively struggled to figure out the appropriate way to have relationships with male students within the confines of modesty, how to negotiate family relationships with parents and siblings who do not sign, and what it meant to have menstrual cramps as no one had ever told them. In having these conversations, they created a moral problem solving space as well as a moral economy of information sharing.
and exchange. Students often told me how grateful they were to have these other students to share information with and learn from as they did not learn these things elsewhere. Deafs told me that it was due to this information and knowledge sharing that they learned crucial things about dating, intimacy, health, family relations, and that they therefore developed.

Exit Interviews and Future Jobs

In June of 2009, Rashmi, the head of the computer department, and I conducted individual exit interviews with thirteen computer students. These students ranged in age from seventeen to twenty seven and they were all unclear about what their next steps after they finished their computer course. Some of the interviews went more smoothly than others, depending on the students’ sign language and language skills. When we asked the students what they had learned, they immediately and enthusiastically responded with “English and sign language” and they spoke glowingly about Chetan’s class. Learning English and sign language skills seemed to be what they most valued and were most excited about; almost everyone told us that they wanted more of both in order “to develop more. English and sign language are good for future development.” In contrast, when we asked what they had learned in their computer classes, they were unable to say: they said that they “had learned computers.” Rashmi grew increasingly frustrated as she asked students what specific skills they had learned in their computer classes and many replied “half, half, half” and commented that there were a few teachers that they could not understand well. They told us that they did not think that they had learned much about computers. When she asked them what kind of job they wanted for the future, they said “computer” and when she pressed them on this: “Do you want a data entry job, an animation job, or a web design job?” they could not answer. Many simply replied: “You will give me an address and I will go for a job.”

This was a common refrain. Throughout the year, when I asked computer students where they wanted to work after they finished their courses they told me: “Rashmi will give me an address and I will go.” These students did not have clear ideas about their individual vocational futures although they were able to speak more concretely about the importance of collective deaf development and deaf education; the word development

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59 I saw this sharing and exchange of information at all of the NGOs and training centers that I visited. I also saw it, albeit more intensely, at JSSPH where students lived and attended class together. As I did not have access to male students’ intimate conversations or living spaces, I cannot make claims about male intimate sharing and knowledge exchanges.

60 Rashmi and I utilized sign language and either spoken English, Kannada, or Tamil to conduct the interviews. In most cases we used a combination of sign language and spoken English. Some of the interviews on one day were very difficult due to Rashmi’s inability to change or adjust her communicative practices to meet the needs of her students and the students’ poor sign and spoken language skills— they were from rural Karnataka or they had graduated from a deaf school in Bangalore where they had not had access to language. The following day was much easier and Rashmi told me: “These students are from Bangalore and so they have had exposure and they know more. Yesterday they were either young or from villages and had no exposure…They are so difficult to teach. Here we have to try to teach everyone. We teach people from Tamil, Telugu, Kannada medium, we must try…it is so difficult sometimes.” Rashmi’s statement points to the struggles that she, and other teachers, face in their attempts to work with a heterogeneous group of deaf young adults. However, if Chetan or Radikha had conducted the interviews they would have been much smoother as both Chetan and Radhikha have experience working with deaf people with a wide variety of language backgrounds while Rashmi and most of DPA’s teachers do not.
was used again and again to refer to the unknown but better future of deafs. Deafs were also able to speak about the value of learning English and sign language from Chetan.

However, Rashmi did not have very many addresses and neither did DPA’s Career Guidance and Placement (CGP) office. As I mentioned earlier, DPA is in some ways a relic of the past. While it has a solid reputation within Karnataka’s disability service arena, its employees and current director have not been so good at keeping up with the changing trends of employment in Bangalore, more specifically, the emergence of information technology, business process outsourcing, and data entry operating sectors. Developing connections within these sectors requires a high level of English skill, advanced educational (professional) backgrounds, and certain sophistication which DPA staff largely lack. While the CGP had some addresses for low paying data entry jobs, these were not very popular with most prospective job seekers (and most students were not even informed about these possible placements) and so rather than accept a job from one of these places, students chose to head to yet another vocational training center and learn computers, often the same exact thing, again. This was not only true for the computer students as the fitting/welding and electronics students also went on to study computers or moved to entirely different tracks, much to Radhika’s dismay.

Circulating between Training Centers and Employment in Search of Development

Narayanan (22) and Nagaraj (24) are brothers from Chikmagalur, a rural coffee growing region in Karnataka.\(^{61}\) Narayanan is outgoing and has many deaf friends whom he enjoys socializing with. Narayanan, unlike Nagaraj, frequently made it a point to meet other deaf people. In contrast, Nagaraj is shy and does not have many friends although he is passionate about dance and theater. Their parents are sharecroppers earning below poverty line wages. They grew up attending a residential school for the deaf in a city near to their village funded by the Rotary Club. The school was strictly oral and both brothers told me that they did not learn much. Narayanan told me that when he was fourteen, his teacher told him to come to her house and clean it for her and he did it “because I did not know any better and I was afraid.” After they finished school their parents were worried about what the two brothers would do next. Should they work in the fields too? Their oldest brother was living in Bangalore and working as an electrician and painter. He learned about DPA and told his parents about it, and so their father, Narayanan, and Nagaraj came to Bangalore to visit the organization. Because of the family’s poverty, the brothers were offered fee reductions and despite the fact that Nagaraj loved art and dance, they were enrolled in the fitting course as their older brother and father thought it would be most useful for their futures. Both brothers learned sign language for the first time and Nagaraj said signing helped him to understand things. Even though their older brother did not like signing and Nagaraj felt ashamed, he persisted and kept on signing. He also joined an integrated dance company partially sponsored by Infosys and organized by Infosys employees after this company conducted auditions at DPA.

After finishing their fitting course, DPA gave them and other fitting students an address for a fitting job and they went to the company and were given jobs. Narayanan and the other former DPA students left this job after two months as Narayanan said the

\(^{61}\) Narayanan and Nagaraj’s stories have been compiled through interviews with each of them and their older brother, home visits to their family’s home in Bangalore, and participant observation conducted with them at multiple sites including trainings, church, and workplace visits.
work was too hard and the pay was too low (and it was significantly below minimum wage at 1500 rupees a month) although Nagaraj did not quit. Narayanan enrolled in a free computer training course offered by another NGO named Vision which, after three months, placed him in a data entry position on the night shift with a subcontractor for a major telecommunications company where he earned 6000 rupees a month. However, this company shifted to Delhi and so after three months of working there he was laid off. He then went back to Vision and to another NGO, Employment Center, which recently opened its doors, and asked them both for help finding a job. He became confused because Employment Center offered him another round of computer training. As he had already done an identical training, he did not know if he should do it again. Radikha, DPA’s principal, repeatedly offered him a teaching job at DPA but he said that they pay their deaf workers low wages and so he did not want to work there. He took a job working at a company that makes book binding machines although he frequently took leave and circulated between Vision and Employment Center in search of a better job.

Narayanan also spent much time meeting with other deaf people and discussing the different training centers and employment paths in Bangalore. He contrasted what he learned from other deafs (“deep knowledge”) with what he learned at the various training centers he attended (“half half half”). For Narayanan, the future is to be planned for and discussed with other deafs and he often wondered why Nagaraj did not meet with other deafs like he did. He asked me how Nagaraj was going to have a future life “entirely on his own, entirely self.” Narayanan told me: “One has to talk to and share with other deafs in order to develop;” the future is created through such talking and sharing. As a result of his deaf orientation, Narayanan was fighting with his oldest brother who threatened to send him back to the village. In home visits, it was clear to me that they had a very difficult time communicating and that the oldest brother did not understand how Narayanan was spending his time and earnings.

In contrast, Nagaraj remained at the low paying fitting job for eight months. When I asked him why, he said: “Patience, I must be patient and continue.” Finally, he quit. After quitting, he went back to DPA and asked for other addresses for fitting jobs but nothing worked out. He then heard from a deaf friend about a three day manual labor job training and employment fair that Vision, another NGO, was offering and so he attended. Before this training, Radhika and others at DPA told him that he must ask Vision for a fitting job and that he must not forget his fitting skills and his government certificate. He completed the three day training and was offered a job as a “houseman” at a prestigious hotel which he accepted and is now earning 4500 rupees a month. (Vision did not help him find a fitting job.) He told me that he likes this job and that after five years, he will be promoted to a greeter and that he will get to wear a suit and tie and greet people. He said that the company will transfer him to another city in the future if he wants. When Radhika heard about this job placement, she was furious and she said: “Vision is not thinking about the future of this boy. He has completed ITC [industrial training center], two years of training…Why has [Vision] placed him in a cleaning job? How is this best for the boy? Vision is not thinking about the future of this boy, [they] are only thinking about money.” For Radhika did not think of the future solely in terms of

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62 With this income Narayanan was the highest earner in his family and he was quite proud of this fact although this income was not enough to support his extended family.
money: she thought about stability, status, and longevity (as evident in her discussion of railway jobs which I mentioned earlier).

Producing Workers with Disabilities instead of/out of People with Disabilities

Indeed it does seem like Vision has a very different view of, and path towards, deaf futures than DPA does. Two software engineers started Vision in 1999. These engineers, a married couple, previously worked in the United States in the corporate and information technology (IT) sectors. Chandra, the more public face and spokesperson of Vision, has a blind brother who she helped “to successfully rehabilitate.” Vision started out working exclusively with blind job seekers and provided training and placement services to them. As a result of Chandra’s eloquence, connections, and previous experience, she has been able to successfully place blind people in various IT companies and as transcriptionists. Like DPA, Vision did not start out to serve deaf people but when Chandra successfully placed one deaf person in an IT company, she received an influx of deaf applicants for trainings and jobs and she now recruits potential deaf candidates and students from colleges and technical diploma programs in south India. As a result of deaf demand, Vision now runs three to six month business process outsourcing (BPO) training courses where disabled people learn how to perform back office tasks such as data entry, data collation, and on-line customer service techniques. Vision offers trainings that are almost exclusively for deaf candidates with diplomas, bachelors degrees, or excellent English skills. Vision also works closely with Employment Center, another NGO, which runs more basic data entry operator (DEO) and computer courses. Students who perform well in this basic course will be considered for Vision’s BPO training. In addition, Vision also offers manual job trainings for deafs without higher education or good communication skills, like the one that Nagaraj attended.

Unlike DPA, Vision will only work with private companies and corporations and its placement records read like a globalization laundry list: Shell Oil, Pepsico, Café Coffee Day, Infosys, Mphasis, Thompson-Reuters, IBM, Big Bazaar, and Indian Tobacco Company. My point in listing these companies is to illustrate the fact that Vision has connections, and works closely, with some of India’s current leading corporations. These connections are a source of great pride to deaf young adults who talk about how Vision has transformed Bangalore into a city of opportunity for deaf young adults and how Chandra helps them to improve their lives. Rajesh, a young deaf man working for a large multinational company, told me that deaf in Bangalore have a lot to be proud of and it is thanks to Vision’s work. He said that Vision’s opening has “resulted in milestones for the deaf.” I suggest that through its trainings and placements, Vision attempts to produce “the worker with disability (WWD)” instead of or in place of the previous (yet still salient) welfare category of “the person with disability (PWD).” In the following sections, through description and analysis of Vision’s registration and intake process, its manual labor trainings, and its BPO trainings, I show how both its manual and BPO trainings attempt to produce a malleable, responsible, and self-aware WWD who will perform productively within circulations of capital. As I will also show, these trainings are also spaces of deaf sociality where deaf development is discussed and aspired towards.

Almost all deaf who attend Vision’s trainings come to a once monthly registration day to which they bring all relevant certificates and score sheets. They are required to take an aptitude test and then have an intake and evaluation meeting with a trainer or
volunteer who knows some sign language. This intake person assesses them on their willingness to work hard, work flexible hours, and commute long distances. They are asked about their salary expectations and if these are deemed to be too high, the person conducting the intake bluntly talks them down. Job seekers are asked what they are doing now and if they are not independently looking for a job, the intake conductor will scold them for sitting at home and wasting time. They are asked pointed questions such as “Do you want an easy job or a hard job?” and “Is it OK to go to work late?” Deafs are then placed into categories: manual labor, semi-skilled labor, or BPO training and they are informed about appropriate training or career options.

Deafs come from all over south India and Vision’s waiting room is a social space in which deafs from all walks of life, from hotel housemen to IT professionals, come into contact with each other and sometimes interact and sometimes avoid eye contact as they wait, sometimes full days, for their intakes to take place. These registration days facilitated socializing as deafs who knew each other from school, college, or church randomly ran into each other here and caught up on each others’ news. Deafs did not seem to mind waiting as most had already had experience with it: they had spent time waiting for other jobs which did not materialize, waiting for the monthly intake day to be held, and for many, this was not their first visit to Vision and they were back after losing or leaving jobs that they previously held.

I start with Vision’s manual labor employment trainings and then I will discuss its BPO trainings. I attended parts of Vision’s first three day manual labor training and I attended one day of its second training. Trainees who successfully completed the three days were given a ticket to a branded manual labor job fair where they would have the opportunity to be placed at different companies. Attendees ranged in age from eighteen to forty plus and most had worked before as garment workers, baggage handlers at the airport, baristas, welders, and petrol pumpers. The trainings were very structured and those who arrived on time were given badges to pin to their shirts that said “Great” and those who were late were publicly chastised by Chandra and the other trainers. Trainees were encouraged to scold their late counterparts as well and they were simultaneously extremely harsh and lenient. On the first morning of the second batch of the training, one shy young man was extremely late. He was publicly ridiculed and lambasted by the other trainees for being so late and he was so embarrassed that after standing there with his head hanging, he turned around and left. One of the trainers went out to bring him back and upon his return, another trainee, in a dramatic switch from her previously harsh demeanor, said: “Do not be shy, we are all deaf here, we are the same.” In uttering “deaf-deaf same,” this woman was marking the space as a deaf space.

The trainings were mostly based on interactive group activities in which deafs were supposed to learn the value of teamwork and learning from each other. For one activity, the deafs were given a competitive card game to play in teams of five or six people. Each member had a certain number of cards that they had to dispose of in a specific order requiring them all to pay attention and work together. If one person failed

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63 By branded manual labor, I mean manual labor performed at “brand name” companies and corporations such as Café Coffee Day, Barista, Shell Oil, Indian Tobacco Company, Leela Hotels, Big Bazaar, and others. These companies represent the burgeoning of India’s chain retail sector and according to many people I spoke to working in the employment placement field, these retail positions represented opportunities for poor, uneducated, and backwards youth.
to pay attention and missed the order of the cards, the team would lose. Chandra told them that when they worked for a company, they would be part of a team and so they needed to work hard like in this game: “You must work the same way in company as you worked in the game.” Throughout the training, work was constantly likened to a challenging game that employees had to win or succeed in.

Another training activity involved working in groups to create little squares of paper of identical dimensions by hand. This activity was designed to emphasize the importance of working together and learning from each other as some people were better than others at creating the squares and so the slower trainees were supposed to learn from their faster counterparts. This activity was also about cultivating discipline as the painstaking process of manually cutting and crafting small pieces of paper was extremely tedious and must have seemed pointless to the trainees. After this paper cutting exercise was finished, Chandra said: “When games are hard, you enjoy them but when work is hard you do not enjoy it. Just like when you play cricket, when the manager asks you to work hard, [you should] work more, accept, enjoy.” In this sense, Chandra was likening repetitious and difficult labor to playing cricket.

Throughout the training, Chandra and the other trainers were focused on instilling a sense of responsibility in trainees towards employers and they had cleverly devised two role plays to highlight the importance of responsibility. Four trainees were invited to act out a family at dinner time—a father, mother, and two small children. In the first performance, the mother cooks food and everyone eats and is happy. After this, Chandra said: “See, a good family. The mother is doing her responsibility and so everyone is happy.” In the second role play, the mother refuses to cook, and so the children and the father are left hungry and the children cry. After this performance, Chandra said:

“See what happens when the mother does not do her responsibility. Same with you in the company. You must do your responsibility. At home, your mother cooks even when she is sick and has fever. When people come from out of town she cooks more and does not complain. She knows her responsibility. Same, you in company…If the manager asks you to work late, do not complain. If the manager asks you to come in on Sunday, go in on Sunday.”

This performance of the good and bad family had an impact on most of the students and they were very worked up about the bad mother’s abdication of her responsibility and the resulting disorder (although one trainee suggested buying the mother a sari and another suggested going out to dinner). Chandra then asked everyone to stand up and recite: “I will accept my responsibility” and everyone did so with great enthusiasm.

Chandra then pleaded with everyone to stay in the job placements that she found them as if not, it would bring shame on her. And besides, if they quit there would be no income at all while at least if they stayed in their jobs there would be some income—

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64 When communicating with the deaf, Chandra rarely spoke in grammatical English and she used very simple (yet clear and effective) signs that were rarely complete sentences. She dramatically differs from Radhika in her ways of relating to deaf people (she dramatically simplifies her language), and her vision of what deaf futures look like (deafs should be plugged into multinational companies as support staff or back office workers). In quotes from her, I try to balance between legibility to the reader and her actual utterance.
if it was a very low amount. She also told everyone to go home and ask their parents how much they earned when they first started working and then how much they earned today. Her goal was to show the trainees that they could not expect a big salary increase and therefore to encourage modest expectations. Trainees who previously worked were invited up to “confess,” in Chandra’s words, their mistakes on the job and the other trainees were supposed to learn from these mistakes. These confessions served to create a space for evaluating the “good” and “bad” worker and provided opportunities for self-examination as well as adjusting one’s expectations to become “more realistic.” After all, as Chandra said, “There are so many unemployed in India, what to do?”

These three day trainings were designed to impart soft skills in which deafs were taught to be flexible and responsible workers able to engage in team work with low salary expectations. Yet these spaces were also used by deafs as spaces of sharing information about previous education, job information, and their feelings of being discriminated against by normal managers and workers. Trainings were very social and deafs who did not know each other interacted with each other during the training, over tea and lunch breaks, and afterwards when they met each other at other deaf functions. During group exercises, deafs with stronger sign language and English language skills and more work experience often took on the responsibilities of writing and reporting back to the group and acted as mentors to those who had never worked before. As the first training batch included a particularly gregarious group of young people who had just finished class ten, older trainees coached them and offered them advice on how to behave, communicate, and what kinds of expectations they should have. Chandra’s emphasis on team work therefore helped to create a broader sense of deaf responsibility and orientation.

Unlike the manual labor training which focused on deafs with little educational qualifications, Vision’s three month BPO training program attracted deaf young adults from all over south India with either diplomas, bachelors degrees, or other forms of higher education. When I left Bangalore in August 2009, Vision had conducted three rounds of such trainings and was in the middle of its fourth batch. At least half of each batch had been successfully placed at a prestigious BPO corporation. On my last visit to the training center, members of the fourth batch were speculating about where they would be placed. A batch was comprised of around fifteen students, mostly male, taught by two young and energetic trainers; Chandra also made guest appearances and occasionally taught. In many cases, trainees knew each other from diploma courses at JSSPH, primary schools in Kerala, or primary schools in Bangalore. In the fourth batch, fourteen out of seventeen of the trainees present had attended JSSPH at one time or another and so

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65 Soft skills are personal characteristics and interpersonal skills including flexibility, time management, cheerfulness, motivation, and responsibility and they are to be compared and contrasted to hard skills which include technical skills. Vision did not teach any hard skills in its manual labor trainings.

66 While these deafs may have had degrees, in many cases they were barely functionally literate. They talked about not-learning and copying in their higher education experiences. In many higher education programs, teachers do not use sign language and deafs struggle to follow and learn.

67 Young men are much more mobile than young women and are able to migrate more easily to Bangalore for such trainings and employment opportunities. Many families were resistant to having their daughters do BPO training or work at BPOs as they associated this employment with the night shift which they thought was dangerous. In each batch there were always a few young women but the gender distribution was not equal by any means.
they had shared experiences and similar sign language. Trainees from out of town stayed in paying guest homes or in rented flats together, which further cemented deaf bonds.

Many of the trainees told me that they did not actually want BPO jobs-- they had studied electrical engineering, architecture and auto-cad, computer science and software, and art-- but that they were told by Vision during their intake and registration that BPO work was the best career for deaf people and they were encouraged to do BPO training. Some of the trainees were quite ambivalent about doing the training; a few had stories of trying to find jobs in other sectors on their own and failing. There were also deafs who were formerly enrolled in bachelors programs in engineering who dropped out of these programs because of no communication access. Instead, they came to Vision for BPO training because at least at Vision the trainers knew sign language (although not fluently). In one batch there was a sign language instructor turned future BPO worker (he was not earning enough for his family as a sign language instructor) and he playfully corrected other candidates’ sign language usage. There was also one deaf who had participated in Vision’s first BPO training batch and he had been placed at a prestigious corporation but his placement fell through and so Chandra told him to repeat the training instead of wasting time sitting around at home. These deafs had multiple stories of “adjusting:” of adjusting expectations in relation to employment and of adjusting sign language and communication styles in relation to other deafs who were from different locations in south India and elsewhere. Adjusting was considered part of being patient and waiting for deaf development-- and it was necessary for creating deaf sociality.

Vision’s BPO trainings were both disciplinary and social spaces. Upon walking into the training center, the bare first floor of a house in an elite area of Bangalore appointed only with a row of computers and plastic chairs, the first thing that caught my eye were four large charts on the wall. Each chart had trainees’ names listed on it. One chart was for daily typing speed and accuracy, another was for weekly typing goals, a third was for attendance, and then a fourth was for overall performance and points won for good behavior, scoring well on aptitude tests, and coming to training on time. The trainees filled out these charts daily and compared their scores with each other. Trainees also came up with their own rules for the training and they were encouraged to monitor others and themselves. Identical to the manual job training, trainees were encouraged to work in groups on projects and they were supposed to read the newspaper in small groups every morning and present to the whole training batch about an article-- although, because they could not read the newspapers very well, they spent most of their time sharing personal stories and news. In addition, while they were supposed to work individually on aptitude tests, they often copied and asked each other for help, much to the trainers’ dismay. Individual work such as aptitude tests were collectively completed.

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68 Sign language at JSPHH is considered to be unique as students come from all over India and so must adjust to different sign language lexicons. Over the years a JSPHH-based sign language has formed. Although this has not been studied at all it seemed to me to be a mixture of various ISL lexicons.

69 In Chapter Four I discuss the sameness work that deaf trainees and workers engaged in to create productive deaf groups. Adjusting is a form of sameness work.

70 While I interviewed deafs who participated in all four batches of Vision’s BPO training, I conducted participant observation mainly in the third batch and so most of the ethnographic material included here is from the third batch of training.
The deaf trainees preferred to work in groups and individualization in the form of aptitude tests and individual projects was resisted or altogether ignored.

In addition to typing practice and team work, trainees also learned analytical skills from Chandra and their regular trainers. They learned how to engage in “self observation” and to list the qualities needed to work well in a BPO office: “good typing speed, accuracy, good English skills, and high performance” and they were placed in groups to write “reports” to Chandra about which qualities they did and did not have. As part of practicing analytical skills, the trainees engaged in an exercise in which they had to assess each others’ positive and negative qualities. In almost all cases, positive qualities included caring about and helping other trainees and other deaf in general, having good behavior (although this was not elaborated upon), having good English skills, joking around, and having good sign language skills. Negative qualities listed included poor English skills, always asking for help from other deafs, being lazy, and typing slowly or improperly. These responses suggest that the deaf trainees were learning to embody both the normative values required by their future employers-- fast typing, accuracy, and good English skills-- and the normative values inherent within this particular form of deaf sociality-- helping and supporting other deaf, communicating through telling stories and jokes, and having good communication skills.71

On the second to last day of the training, there was a proliferation of picture taking, drama performances, and at the very end, trainees stood up and said what they had learned-- not to be lazy, how to type fast, to come to training on time, and to work hard. Everyone who attended (trainees, trainers, and about five Vision employees) applauded. The mood was very festive and the trainees told me that they were happy to finally be finished with the training. The following day, they received a combination lecture and pep talk from one of their trainers who told them that while they waited for one to three months for their employment placement, they had to continue to practice their typing, aptitude, and English skills. She told them that they constantly had to engage in self observation and that Vision would continue to observe and analyze them as well. She said that they were starting new lives and so they must continue to maintain their skills-- and then the training was over and this batch began to wait for placements.72

After this pep talk, I went for lunch with three of the trainees and they discussed how they needed to be patient as they waited for Vision to give them jobs. They said that some companies would not hire deaf people and so patience was necessary. However, they were hopeful that companies would see that they had qualifications and choose them. They spoke about how other trainees had not done so well at JSSPH where they had received diplomas in computer science and this is why they had not gotten jobs, they analyzed the appropriateness of the drama performance the day before (which included mimicking of the trainers), and they bickered about whether we should be spending the

71 As I was intrigued by this exercise, I later did a similar exercise with DPA students and asked them to go around and list positive and negative qualities that their fellow trainees possessed and the responses mirrored those offered by Vision students. Students overwhelmingly mentioned help, care, and support as positive characteristics.

72 Xiang Biao (2007) writes about waiting, or being “benched,” as an inherent part of being a certain kind of (not too highly) trained information technology worker. The deaf graduates from Vision’s BPO training program were therefore being socialized into the practice of waiting. Indeed, many of these future workers and other deafs who I met had experiences of being benched while on the job and of waiting for work even after being hired.
extra ten rupees to eat in the air conditioned section of the restaurant when they did not have jobs yet. There seemed to be a moral undertone to all of the discussions: What was the proper way to behave? Who were the deserving deaf? What was the correct way to be oriented towards the future?

Patience, Waiting, and Suspicion

During lunch, I asked these three deafs if they felt like they were waiting for a placement and it seemed to me that they did not feel comfortable with the concept of “waiting” as they told me that they felt like they needed to be patient. Waiting was modified by patience; they were waiting patiently. Aruna, one of the two young women in the training, told me that there was a recession right now and that many deafs did not understand this and so they did not understand why they needed to be patient. For Aruna and my other two lunch partners (and for Nagaraj the welder turned houseman who I mentioned earlier), patience is a virtuous characteristic to be cultivated. This patient comportment that Aruna and the others embodied was identical to the comportment that I discussed earlier in my analysis of DPA’s trainees who were patiently waiting for deaf futures in which there would be opportunities for deaf development.

These deafs were willing to “adjust” their current day orientations and desires in order to cultivate such patient comportments. There is currently a recession but we will eventually be chosen because we are qualified. There is no access now to sign language but there will be in the future. Patience. Patience is necessary because there is no other option; patience is a virtue learned and practiced as a result of structural inequality. I want to note that I see waiting and patience as competing (although occasionally complimentary) ways of being in the world as well as analytics; while Appadurai (2001) writes about what he terms “the politics of patience” that coalitions of slum-dwellers use to obtain better living conditions, I am interested in what this stress on (the virtues of) “patience” obfuscates and masks. To make a rather banal statement, there are no “patience rooms” in railway stations although there are waiting rooms where people wait, sometimes patiently and sometimes not, and so it seems to me that patience and waiting do not always go hand in hand (and see Chapter Seven for more on the relationship between waiting and patience.)

In contrast, I heard many of the other trainees express frustration over the process of waiting, especially four trainees who had previously done the basic computer course that Vision offered in conjunction with Employment Center. One of these four trainees, Jagadish, told me that he felt that a year was “lost.” He had graduated from JSSPH in May and then immediately moved to Bangalore with some friends. He enrolled in the basic computer course that Vision and Employment Center offered in July and finished this in December. Then, he started the BPO training in February and finished this at the end of April. When I met him in June, he was incredibly frustrated by the lack of a job and by the fact that he felt like he was wasting his life-- and his family’s money. He felt like he had not learned anything from any of the training programs that he had

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73 Mimicking is a very popular drama and entertainment practice within deaf communities and skilled mimickers will usually have people in hysterics. It is a playful practice and not intended to be disrespectful.

74 Aruna was Radhika’s first deaf student at DPA and after graduating from DPA she went to work for a private electronics factory for two years. Her salary there was extremely low and so she enrolled in a private computer training program and then Vision’s BPO training program.
participated in although he did enjoy the social opportunities that they had offered him as well as the freedom to live apart from his family in Bangalore. Jagadish lived with three other trainees in a small flat on the outskirts of Bangalore and they spent their time watching Telugu and Malayam movies both at home and in the theater, wandering around Bangalore’s central shopping districts, and playing carrom, or finger billiards. Waiting for a job was embodied through socializing with each other, worrying about “wasting time” and speculating about whether or not Vision and the other centers were “good” or “bad” and whether they were perhaps lying to them about finding them a placement. (Also see Jeffrey 2010 on waiting and the social act of “timepass.”)

These trainees were justified in being suspicious because while they were enrolled in Vision and Employment Center’s joint basic computer training, Employment Center had told them that it would give them a job within a month after finishing training. This did not happen. And at one point during Vision’s BPO training, they had received text messages from someone at the Employment Center asking them to come to interview for jobs. These four deaf, and a few others from the earlier training, dressed up nicely and went over to Employment Center with high hopes. However, it turned out that Employment Center was having funders visit and they wanted to stage a mock interview in order to impress them. When the deafs realized this, they were extremely angry and decided that Employment Center was “fooling” them, and that the Employment Center was “bad” while Vision was “good.”

Deafs were constantly making judgments about the three main training centers--DPA, Vision, and the Employment Center-- in relation to each other and they were constantly comparing and contrasting them as they circulated through each of them, often cycling back as well, in search of employment or more training. Comparing and contrasting was mainly about two key concerns: where did deafs “learn and understand” the most and which place would provide them with a job placement. While some of the deafs who I came across were entirely devoted to Vision-- one young man who previously did welding training and then went to Vision for BPO training told me “I will follow Vision only. I want to see Vision and deaf develop for the future”-- still others were very strategic about attending different centers and asked for help finding a job placement from each of them.

For the majority of deafs, neither DPA, Vision, or Employment Center were perfect and so in an attempt to learn as much as possible and benefit the most, they circulated. While learning “half half half” in multiple spaces does not constitute a whole, it does result in some learning and some is better than nothing (which is what deafs said about what they learned before). In addition, deafs took strong pedagogic

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75 Ironically, these trainees were scolded when they returned to Vision that afternoon because they had missed most of their BPO training that day which was not authorized.
76 This young man saw Vision as more than just a training center; it was a moral life project. He volunteered there on Saturdays during registration and intake days and he talked about how he liked helping other deaf to develop and grow. He saw Vision as doing more to contribute to deaf development than the other NGOs.
77 This circulation between various centers became incredibly clear to me one Monday when I went to conduct participant observation at the Employment Center. DPA’s one year basic computer course had just finished two days before, on Saturday, and on Monday five DPA graduates arrived at the Employment Center to register for the next batch of its free three month computer and English training (taught by a trainer who knew some basic sign language).
stances in relation to each other. Deafs with more (typing, English, and life) experience taught those with less experience. Each training batch at each center was very much produced out of the pooling of knowledge and understandings gained from other centers. Notebooks and workbooks were used for multiple trainings and in thumbing through trainees’ notebooks I came across an archeology of knowledge creation from multiple training centers and courses. As a result of such circulations and layering of knowledge, it was difficult to view each of the training centers as self contained or bounded units. The training centers were physically and architecturally open spaces as well. Gates and doors were never locked and there was an on-going stream of former trainees returning for job advice, typing practice, and just to hang out, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other missionaries hoping to witness to deafs, and curious deafs just coming to see the training centers.

Fast Typing Speeds and Slow Time

There were many students with slow typing speeds and poor English skills who were unable to find computer jobs. Yet they kept on coming to these organizations to practice their typing, meet their friends, and to wait together for jobs. There were also those who were too young for employment—sixteen and seventeen years of age—who came to these organizations because their families were too poor to pay for higher education or they did not want to study anymore and so they continued a routine of typing practice even after they had finished their basic training courses. While these organizations were meant to be spaces that deaf young adults moved through—a brief interlude between finishing school (either an SSLC, a diploma, a certificate course, or a bachelors degree) and employment—in practice these organizations were produced as spaces of waiting, typing, and socializing; they were dwelling spaces for the meantime. Time, through circulations between training centers and everyday practices of waiting for employment placements (for one month, two months, three months), became stretched out. I suggest that this slowing of time represents a different way of experiencing modernity than David Harvey’s (1990) theorization of modernity as characterized by space-time compression in which there are fewer boundaries and time moves very quickly. Time here is stretched out, ironically, mocking the deaf typer’s race against the clock to improve her typing score.

It is important to note that this structure of waiting was an entirely present oriented practice in the sense that there was no clear path towards a known future. Deaf young adults had hopes for the future that were often modeled upon ideas of a western present, and this was out of reach. And so through discussing, and speculating about, deaf development, deaf young adults created a present which was inflected by this vision of the future. In earlier discussions about DPA I noted that its principal Radhika talked about the clear future paths of those engaged in the welding industry. However, the futures of deafs circulating between branded manual labor jobs and those circulating between different BPO and DEO processes is murky. As there are no precedents (for neither deafs nor normals), this future is uncharted and unknown.78 And despite ideologies and images of India Shining, there are no guarantees of teleological futures

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78 Although as I noted, the futures that Radhika envisions are also significantly less certain and stable because of the downsizing of government industries. And since there is already an older generation of deaf working within these industries, the quota for deaf workers has already been met.

Conclusion: Deaf Development and the Everyday

Vocational training centers and organizations such as DPA, Vision, and Employment Center are so much a part of the social and moral fabric of deaf young adults’ lives in Bangalore that wealthier and/or successful deaf young adults often told me that they hoped to help other deafs by starting their own training programs. These training programs would have deaf teachers and feature sign language as the medium of instruction. And in the meantime, the experience of modernity for these deafs is about circulating through spaces of waiting, cultivating patience, and engaging in (strategic) sharing and helping other deafs in pursuit of deaf development. While some deaf young adults do learn (usually “half half half”) technical and marketable skills in these vocational training centers such as computer, typing, welding, and electronics skills, I argue that the values and orientations that deafs learn in these spaces are more important for everyday life; deafs use these values and orientations to create an everyday marked by desiring deaf development. These values include an orientation towards other deafs, a collective sense of responsibility towards sharing and pooling information, valuing sign language, and desiring better deaf futures.

It is important to note that these training centers do not exist in all Indian cities and the existence of three large centers is rather unique to Bangalore. When I spent time in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, I observed that such centers did not exist and that deaf people therefore depended on their families, neighbors, or extended social networks for finding employment. And so there was a different structure of opportunity that existed as a result of not having so many NGOs present. Deaf people were less dependent on such NGOs and they spent time actively looking for employment instead of waiting for an NGO to find them a job.
Chapter Four: Remaking Employment

“One cannot “be” either a cell or molecule-- or a woman, colonized person, labourer, and so on-- if one intends to see and see from these positions critically. Being is much more problematic and contingent” (Haraway 1991, 192).

In this chapter I discuss the ways that deaf young adults are produced as a deaf group. I analyze the ways that NGOs and employers position deaf young adults “to be” deaf, and only deaf, a positioning that obscures forms of difference through privileging sameness. Through focusing only on deafness, other forms of being, belonging, and relating are erased and deaf young adults are seen as identical to each other. I argue that this is a bad “visual system” because it does not recognize the ways that deaf people might be dissimilar from each other (Haraway 1991, 192). This privileging of sameness is productive for NGOs that provide vocational training and job placement services as well as for corporations that hire deaf young adults. The former are able to create homogenous training programs for “one size fits all” deafs and the later are able to hire deafs as a group and treat all deaf employees identically.

As a result of being positioned as either potential or current deaf workers, deaf young adults engage in what I call sameness work through which they both negotiate differences between them and other deafs and manage and adjust their own expectations. This sameness work is built upon a foundation of similar, and many times shared, experiences of language, education, and vocational training. It also depends on deaf young adults’ adjusting their expectations and ways of communicating and relating. Through engaging in this sameness work, deaf young adults come to define themselves first and foremost as deaf and they become wholly interpellated into being a part of a deaf group. In the previous chapter I focused on organizations providing vocational training and the ways that deaf young adults circulated through training centers in search of deaf development. In this chapter I shift the focus to actual spaces of employment, although I continue to look at the relationship between training centers, employment sites, and other spaces where deaf young adults circulate, and I explore how the introduction of deaf employees, in the form of the deaf group, creates new workplace experiences for both normal and deaf employees.

I start this chapter with a historical overview of employment of people with disabilities in India and then I move to discuss employment within the Information Technology (IT) sector. I focus more specifically on the business process outsourcing (BPO) and Data Entry Operation (DEO) sectors because most vocational training in urban areas is designed to place trainees in these sectors. As I discussed in the previous chapter, computer training was the most popular training in Bangalore for deaf young adults during the period when I conducted my fieldwork. Moving forward, I explore the role that corporate social responsibility (CSR) plays in hiring people with disabilities in general and deaf people in particular, and what the effects and affects of hiring disabled and deaf workers are for corporations. I then focus on a small BPO and DEO corporation in Bangalore which only hires people with disabilities in order to analyze how the workplace is being created as an intimate and familial space for and by deaf workers, in a sense taking advantage of deaf workers’ orientation towards each other and turning unintended deaf space into deaf space that is productive for the corporation. I then leave
the BPO and DEO sectors behind for other formal and informal sectors and ask questions about what it means to be a deaf worker in urban India more generally. Throughout this chapter, I explore how deaf young adults experience being part of a “deaf group” and how they negotiate tensions around sameness and difference.

A Short History of Disability Employment in India

Before delving into my ethnographic data I first provide an overview of the structure of employment opportunities available to deaf and disabled workers in India. India did not have legislation related to disability and employment until 1977 when a three percent reservation was instituted for people with disabilities in public sector employment. This reservation was only in the “C” and “D” categories which included mostly manual and unskilled labor. Deaf people were entitled to one percent of this three percent; the other two percent went to workers with physical disabilities and blind people respectively. In 1995 the landmark Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) (PWD) Act was passed after prolonged activism by organizations representing people with physical disabilities and blind people. This act continued to mandate a three percent reservation for people with disabilities although the categories were changed to include “A” and “B” level positions-- therefore including prestigious positions such as officer positions in the Indian Administrative Service.

It has been estimated, however, that the number of posts that the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) has identified as being suitable for people with disabilities is only ten percent of the actual number of possible posts (World Bank 2007) and that there is actually a significant backlog of posts that have not been filled. The percentage of disabled people in all posts remains negligible at 0.44 percent (ibid). Even when deaf people are “eligible” for positions and pass the necessary exams, they are often denied postings. This was evident in the media publicized case of Maniram Sharma, a young deaf man who passed the Indian Administrative Service exam three times in 2005, 2006, and 2009 and was refused a position because officials said that he was required to have at least seventy percent hearing ability (Nagarajan 2009). There is also much confusion about when posts are open and how to apply. The process is bureaucratic and not transparent despite the opening of Employment Exchange Bureaus in several cities that are dedicated offices where disabled job seekers can solicit information about openings.

The 1995 PWD Act does not mandate that the private sector provide such quotas nor does it require any kind of anti-discrimination practices by the private sector. Section forty one of the 1995 PWD Act (vaguely) calls for the provision of “incentives” to both public and private sector companies to hire people with disabilities in order to ensure that at least five percent of the workforce is disabled. However, incentives were not instituted until 2008. In 2008, the government unveiled a scheme that would pay for the employer’s contribution to the Employee Provident Fund and Employee State Insurance for private

80 Sharma elected to undergo cochlear implant surgery in 2009 and currently his level of hearing loss is under dispute. The private hospital where he was implanted certified him as having less than seventy percent hearing loss while another government hospital stated that he is still one hundred percent deaf. The surgeon and cochlear implant specialist at the first hospital contends that the government hospital did not have the necessary medical equipment to check Sharma’s hearing (Nagarajan 2009).
sector employees earning up to 25,000 rupees per month for up to three years. It is not known what effect this scheme will have on private sector employment as there is no regulation of this sector. There was much debate in 1999 and 2000 about extending the quota system to the private sector and requiring the private sector to reserve three percent of its positions. However, this initiative, proposed by Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment Maneka Gandhi, was overwhelmingly shot down.

On October 1, 2007, India ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) amidst much fanfare and jubilation within the disability movement. This document requires that ratifiers ensure that people with disabilities have equal opportunities to employment in all sectors and it specifically mentions the private sector. Although India has signed and ratified the document, it has not been mainstreamed into Indian laws and according to disability activists, no efforts have been made to implement it. The Disability Rights Group (a coalition of disability advocacy groups), including the Delhi based National Indian Deaf Association (NIDA), has organized multiple protests around the failure to implement the UNCRPD. There are currently negotiations and consultations with government officials in order to determine whether the 1995 act should be amended or a new act should be passed in order to reflect the current reality of employment in India in which the private sector has emerged as the dominant source of employment.

Deaf and disabled workers constantly state that they face discrimination in hiring and that they do not have the same opportunities as normal people. One organization that has worked prolifically to expand opportunities for people with disabilities in the private sector is the National Coalition on Disability and Employment (NCDE) started in 1996 by a politically well-connected and charismatic wheelchair user, Salim Hafez, who also helped found the Disability Rights Group. With much perseverance, NCDE successfully reached out to India’s two large chambers of commerce and business organizations-- the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). The NCDE also organized a series of roundtables on disability and employment in the early 2000s to which it invited heads of India’s growing IT sector in order to encourage employment of people with disabilities in this sector. The NCDE also organized studies that provided data on the poor track records of India’s top one hundred businesses in employing people with disabilities and these studies subsequently received media publicity. As a result of the NCDE’s work, disability and employment, at least within the corporate sector and later in the IT sector, became a more visible and politically charged issue. An editorial in the Hindu on December 4, 1999 titled “Empowerment Through Employment” states:

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81 25,000 Rupees, or around $565.00, is a middle class salary but seems quite low as a cap.
82 It is important to note that until 2005, with the founding of the NIDA, the interests of deaf sign language users were not heavily represented within the Disability Rights Group. The Delhi Association for the Deaf is not a strong advocacy group and does not engage in contentious politics.
83 Since NCDE’s initial advocacy work directed at the IT sector, a few former employees have gone on to work with IT corporations as consultants and there is a close relationship between NCDE and IT firms which is reinforced by NCDE’s annual award competition which honors corporations for hiring people with disabilities. Unlike with other Indian social movements such as the feminist or labor movement, the disability movement has not aligned itself much with other movements nor has it developed an analysis of labor and capital. Its close relationships with corporations make this very clear.
…the record of successive Governments in securing employment [for people with disabilities] is an abysmal 0.4 percent as shown by a recent study conducted by the [National Coalition on Disability and Employment]. But if there is at least an official policy on disabilities with all its shortcomings, the corporate sector does not even have that to boast about. The neglect of the disabled is particularly glaring in the context of pronouncements in recent times by the Confederation of Indian Industries regarding its commitment to the social sector, including the campaign against child-labour, measures for people affected by AIDS and so on” (The Hindu 1999).

This editorial comment makes it clear that corporations were previously not hiring people with disabilities and that disability issues were perhaps not considered part of social sector issues.

In 2006 the Confederation of Indian Industries finally created a corporate code on disability. The language used in this code has interesting stakes for how it depicts disabled workers. The first paragraph of the code states: “Studies have shown that disabled people are capable, reliable employees, who often stay on the job longer than other employees. They contribute to productivity, to staff morale, and to team spirit in the workplace as a whole” (Diversity and Equal Opportunity Centre 2009). People with disabilities are represented as immobile workers who add value through their immobility, the diversity that they add to the work place, and the ways that they make an employer look caring or noble. These themes are emphasized in a handbook that CII produced in 2009 in coordination with a new disability-focused consulting firm Diversity and Equal Opportunity Centre titled “A Values Route to Success: The Why and How of Employing People with Disabilities”. This handbook cites studies that show that disabled workers stay in the work force for longer periods than non-disabled workers and that they have lower absenteeism rates (ibid, 3). This focus on the immobility of disabled workers and the added value that they produce was something that was emphasized by NGO administrators, employment placement officers, and human resource executives throughout my research.

Before continuing I want to state that the story that I am telling here is a very particular story of deaf and disability employment and it is a story that has emerged rather recently, since the early 2000s. It is a story of employment within India’s growing private corporate and IT sectors. These sectors actually do not employ the bulk of people with disabilities because they require workers with a certain level of literacy and education, which many deaf and disabled people do not have. However, these sectors have been targeted by political disability organizations such as NCDE which advocate for increased employment of people with disabilities. Also, vocational training centers and disability hiring consultants in urban areas often work closely with corporations and businesses within these sectors and design their training programs to impart needed skills.

Working in the private sector is a source of much ambivalence for deaf and disabled people who, like many normals, long for the safety and security of government posts which are perceived as being stable, less demanding, and “for life” (Nair 2005,

84 Most deaf and disabled workers, when employed, can be found in manual and informal sector employment (World Bank 2007).
Yet very few training centers or Human Resource (HR) consultants attempt to place deaf or disabled people in the public sector. I argue that this restricts the structure of opportunities available to deaf and disabled workers as they are increasingly being tracked into corporate, IT, or branded manual labor sectors. So, again, this story of BPO and DEO employment does not reflect the realities of most deaf workers in India although it is the reality of the majority of my interlocutors: Bangalore based deaf young adults who have their SSLC and who in many cases have had some higher education and attended vocational training programs.

Disabled Workers as a Reliable Source of Immobile Labor

In interviews with NGO administrators, job placement officers, and HR executives in Bangalore, I heard arguments expressed again and again about the added value of disabled workers. Specifically when I asked NGO staff how they marketed disabled workers to corporations I was told the following five points: disabled workers stay on the job longer and are more stable; disabled workers add to the diversity of the work force; disabled workers boost the morale of non disabled workers as they are a source of inspiration; normal workers see how well the company takes care of the disabled workers and so they are happy to work there; and hiring disabled workers “makes good business sense” because these disabled workers enter into the consumer pool and become good consumers of their products. Thus, disabled workers are marketed as immobile, stable, diverse, and reliable workers who can add value to the workplace in affective ways through instilling new ways of feeling in the workplace. In addition disability becomes a marker of increased productivity because disabled workers ostensibly stay on the job longer and are more productive as a result of being eager to please their employers.

In August of 2009, I interviewed an extremely loquacious HR executive at Phillips Morgan, a prestigious multinational corporation’s BPO operations which has hired approximately forty deaf workers over the past five years, participates in the CII’s disability forum, and works closely with Bangalore based disability NGOs to promote employment of people with disabilities. When I asked the executive why there was such interest recently in hiring people with disabilities, he told me that initially it was a result of corporate social responsibility (CSR) but more recently it is also because “talent has become scarce and attrition rates have gone up.” He also said that BPO corporations

85 Many of the large government industries in Bangalore—Bharat Electronics Limited, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, and Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited in particular—have apprenticeship programs that young qualified deaf and disabled workers enroll in. As I discussed in Chapter Three, there are few job offers made afterwards and former apprentices often then enroll in BPO or DEO training.

86 There are no definitions of what CSR in India is although it takes a distinct form that differs from what it is in the United States and other western countries. While corporations have historically played a role in the development of Indian society through philanthropy and trustee-ship, there are no legal or policy guidelines for determining what is and is not CSR although it tends to involve providing social services, funds, and programs (Arora and Puranik 2004, Mishra and Suar 2010). There is a perception among Indian corporations that CSR is important for developing a positive image and for branding purposes (and I also was told this in my interviews with HR executives). The number of Indian companies that state that they are engaging in CSR is on the rise (although again it is not clear what exactly they are doing) (Mitra 2007, Arora and Puranik 2004). There is also a voluntary (but vague) code of corporate governance, “Desirable Corporate Governance: A Code”, established in April 1998 by CII (which can be accessed at
had established systems in which processes had been sliced up into different repetitive pieces in the interest of cost-effectiveness and so it was possible to hire lower skilled workers and people with disabilities to do the work. This HR executive sourced people with disabilities from Bangalore-based NGOs such as Vision and he said that Vision provided a “finishing school” and a “stamp of approval” for candidates who might otherwise be viewed with hesitation by HR executives because of their disabilities. He also told me that as a result of employing people with disabilities, his corporation received positive publicity and a national award from NCDE; the management was extremely pleased about this recognition. In speaking about his corporation’s desire to hire people with disabilities, this HR executive was highlighting the relationship between hiring people with disabilities and both corporate social responsibility and combating attrition.

An archival search revealed that disabled workers have increasingly been hired in order to combat attrition and establish a more stable workplace within India’s growing Information Technology sector. In a 2005 Hindu article titled “ Calls for Special Skills,” T.E. and Chandramouly write: “Information technology (IT), IT-enabled services (ITES) and business process outsourcing (BPO) firms are seriously considering employing a greater number of disabled people. The reasons include increasing attrition levels in IT (10-25 per cent), and ITES/BPO (35-50 per cent) firms. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is also driving firms to recruit disabled people.” The article went on to state:

The Indian ITES-BPO sector is expected to touch $20 billion by 2008, and employs around one million people. But the non-availability of talent and high attrition rates are driving companies to discover new sources of talent. One such option is the recruitment of disabled people, say industry experts (T.E. and Chandramouly 2005).

This article points out that most hiring of disabled candidates occurs in the BPO sector or in other lower-end positions despite the fact that many disabled people possess qualifications to enter into the software sector. This highlights the fact that disabled workers are seen first and foremost as disabled and that their educational qualifications may not necessarily be considered (T.E and Chandramouly 2005).

In a 2008 article titled “Persons with disability may apply,” Sahu cites a study undertaken by the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM) and Deloitte which stated that sixty four percent of Information Technology(IT)/Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) have disabled http://www.nfcgindia.org/desirable_corporate_governance_cii.pdf). Newspaper archive reviews reveal that it is only in the last few years that disability employment has become part of CSR.

While we were talking about Vision’s work in job sourcing, I asked this executive what would happen if I decided to apply for a job with this corporation. Specifically, I asked if I would also be told to go through Vision as well (because I am deaf) and he said yes. Phillips Morgan has learned that it is advantageous to source its disabled candidates through NGOs in order to get a “stamp of assurance” from these NGOs.

It should be noted that during my research, some HR executives insisted that hiring people with disabilities was a “diversity issue” and not a corporate social responsibility tactic. In making this shift, these executives were trying to highlight that hiring people with disabilities increased the diversity and ultimately the productivity of their corporations. In hiring workers with disabilities, the corporations ostensibly became aware of the needs of diverse consumers.
workers, a higher percentage then other sectors. Sahu also wrote that Infosys, one of India’s largest IT companies, has over one hundred and sixty five employees with disabilities and that it has introduced a line in its job advertisements which encourages people with disabilities to apply for jobs (Sahu 2008). According to a former NCDE program officer, IT/ITES companies are extremely willing to hire people with disabilities and Infosys even hired a consultant, a former NCDE employee, to work on mainstreaming disability within the company.

The majority of the articles that I found discussed the power of technology to eliminate barriers to employment and the ways that the IT/ITES sector was acting as a trail blazer of inclusion and diversity in the workplace. Technology, in the form of computers, was a great leveler creating equal opportunities for people with disabilities in the workplace. And if barriers remained, they could easily be remedied through technological solutions. As Chandra, Vision’s energetic director, constantly pointed out in presentations and talks with HR managers, there were “workplace solutions” which could easily be put into place such as screen readers and JAWS software for blind employees and using on-line chat services and writing back and forth with deaf workers. Chandra’s confident and assured discussion of “workplace solutions” dovetailed very nicely with the entrepreneurial and intrepid spirit that IT companies presented themselves as possessing.

A Short Background on the Information Technology Sector in Bangalore and the Stakes of its Emergence for Disabled Workers

Here I would like to provide some background on the IT sector in Bangalore in order to give some context to the role of disabled workers within the sector. Bangalore emerged as an ideal location for technology related businesses as a result of the large number of well-educated scientists and engineers training and working in government institutions in the city. The first multinational technology company, Texas Instruments, arrived in the 1980s and was followed by Indian companies such as Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services, and Wipro, all of which worked with multinational companies. However, the technology “boom” did not actually occur until the 1990s when Rajiv Gandhi liberalized the economy, Bangalore’s telecommunication infrastructure improved, and the Karnataka government established attractive taxation, land reform, and labor policies (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006, Goldman 2010, Nair 2005).

There are an estimated twelve hundred IT corporations in the city although many of these are quite small. Karnataka is the leading exporter of software in India, with software exports totaling Rs 37,600 crores in 2005-06, or about $8.3 billion. In terms of numbers of people employed within the sector, there are approximately 200,000-250,000 IT and ITES workers in Bangalore out of a population of seven million. However, these figures are collected from registered companies and most likely do not include contractors or casual workers (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). While a small percentage of the overall population is employed within the IT/ITES sector, the sector looms large in the public imagination as workers being ferried to work in cabs are a common sight on the city’s roads, the building of new technology parks and gleaming office buildings is ubiquitous, and movies and

89 Approximately one percent of Infosys’s workforce is disabled, not a very significant amount.
90 It is therefore quite ironic that despite the possibilities offered by technology, deaf and disabled people often feel that the existence of the BPO and DEO sectors offer them fewer employment possibilities because they are tracked into such work by NGOs and training centers providing computer training.
newspaper articles about these workers are constantly produced. Bangalore is known in the public imaginary both in India and abroad as “India’s Silicon Valley.”

Recent anthropological and sociological works have juxtaposed the IT/ITES sectors with those under the previous state run and sponsored economic system in their ability to master space-time compression through always being in the same time zone as clients and providing services immediately and efficiently despite being on the other side of the world. The IT/ITES sectors have also been critiqued for their economic and political relationship to globalization, the lack of job security that they offer, and the ways that workers are expendable and invisible (Upadhya and Vasavi 2008, Biao 2007). These industries operate according to the logic of corporate capital which, according to Partha Chatterjee (2008), has replaced the previous ruling coalition of class interests-- the landowner, the bureaucrat, and the capitalist. Chatterjee suggests that corporate capital functions by and through different rationalities and that it privileges characteristics such as efficiency, professionalism, and commitment to growth. The IT/ITES industry is an example of the logic of such corporate capital because it operates through processes of rapidly accumulating both labor and land and worker productivity is controlled via invisible surveillance using master computers. In Bangalore, the IT/ITES industries work closely with the state through public private partnerships and the city is being remade by alliances between IT corporations and the state. Both the state and its citizens are being produced as consumers of the city (Nair 2005, 345, Goldman 2010).

The ideal IT/ITES worker engages in self-management, is goal-oriented, and flourishes under competition. Individual workers both manage themselves through engaging in techniques of the self and are managed through competition and being part of a team. BPO workers are highly monitored and controlled through advanced monitoring technology that tracks their work productivity although such management is masked through creating “party like” atmospheres where individuals are encouraged to see themselves as part of a team (Upadhya and Vasavi 2008, 25-30). The illusion of a hierarchically “flat” office culture is created and hierarchy is rendered invisible (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). Workers are supposed to engage in “emotional labor” whereby they are polite, gracious, and invested in helping their clients (and therefore the corporation) (Upadhya and Vasavi 2008).

The IT/ITES industry demands young, mobile, and flexible workers who can be trained quickly and then let go once the process they are working on finishes (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006, Upadhya and Vasavi 2008, Biao 2007). Upadhya and Vasavi (2008) write: “BPO companies have developed a revolving-door system of continuously hiring new recruits, training them quickly and pushing them onto “the floor” while churning out a large proportion of the workforce each year through “voluntary” and “involuntary attrition” (ibid, 19). In order to get ahead in such an industry, workers are constantly mobile and move rapidly in search of better pay packages-- thus frustrating and flummoxing their employers who desire better control over their workers (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). While IT/ITES corporations desire flexibility and adaptability, mobile workers are threats to workplace stability. And here is where immobile deaf workers come into the picture.

Introducing the Deaf Group
In the following sections, I discuss the ways that deaf workers perpetuated the status quo of their BPO offices while also creating deaf spaces of their own and
introducing ruptures for their normal colleagues. In August of 2009, I spent time on the
door of Phillips Morgan, a large multinational corporation’s (MNC), business process
outsourcing center in Bangalore, visiting with fourteen deaf employees who had recently
started working there on a six month data merging project. They had been placed at this
worksite by Vision after completing a three month BPO training course. As I had
previously spent time with these deafs at Vision where they underwent BPO training in
order to improve their typing speeds and learn “soft skills” such as hygiene, discipline,
and team work (see Chapter Three), I was curious about the transition to their new work
place, a work place that they had so eagerly been waiting to join. They had finished their
training at the end of May and had not received the actual job placement until the
beginning of July. They had spent two months sitting at home, in paying guest houses, or
in rented rooms shared with other young deaf men, some working, some also waiting for
work. These deafs were hired as a deaf group as a result of Vision’s outreach to Phillips
Morgan and despite individual geographical, educational, and experiential differences,
the workers were all treated by Phillips Morgan as being identical in that they had all
been assigned to the same work on the same contract and at the same pay rate.

The first time I visited the company in hopes of observing the deaf employees at
work, the internet was down and so none of the employees were working. As the deaf
employees were on a temporary six month contract and there was a dearth of office
space, they were working in two conference rooms which had been converted into
offices. With the internet down, these conference rooms, set apart from the open floor
with low cubicles outside, had turned into intense social spaces that struck me as being
very similar to the atmosphere of the BPO training program that the workers had recently
completed (despite the fact that these rooms, unlike the training center, were plush air
conditioned spaces with fancy office chairs and computers). They were spaces of asking
for and giving advice, sharing information about other deaf people in Bangalore, sending
SMS messages to workers in other rooms to schedule breaks and to friends outside the
workplace, and passing time through joking and discussing weekend plans. As I will
discuss later in this chapter, these conference rooms were occasionally penetrated by
normal workers and when they did come in, conversations stopped in mid sentence and
the atmosphere became more formal and slightly awkward.\footnote{I deliberately use the word
penetration here to reflect a history of ambivalence about the boundaries
between deaf and normal spaces. Frank Bechter (2009) writes about “penetration stories,”
\textit{a} popular form
of story telling within deaf worlds in which deaf people discuss the ways that they penetrate hearing
worlds, using sound to their own advantage. The implication is that deaf people are “beating hearing people
at their own game.” Yet the fact remains that it is often hearing people who penetrate deaf spaces and not
the other way around.}

At all other times, the
rooms felt like the deaf spaces created at vocational training centers where deaf sociality
looms large and permeates the space with its own logic of sharing and exchanging
information.

The conference rooms at Phillips Morgan, cafeterias where deafs meet, and other
BPO office spaces where deaf workers could be found, became deaf spaces where deaf
people were oriented towards each other in their attempts to figure out how to comport
themselves as employees, how to behave and dress, what the proper way to input data
was, and whether or not they would be hired as permanent employees or given raises or
promotions. In the absence of communication access to and with normal colleagues,
deafs attempted to exchange and share knowledge and information with each other. They created a deaf bubble of sorts as information circulated within the bubble but did not go outside it— and there was much discussion and speculation around both everyday routines and what the future would hold. Communication barriers served to augment a sense of group orientation and the creation of a local moral world (Kleinman 1999).

When I first visited Phillips Morgan, the deaf employees entreated me to ask their supervisor if they would be made permanent and if he was satisfied with their performance. As I could communicate through both sign and speech, I was able to bridge the communication gap and ask their supervisor these questions and the deaf employees anxiously waited to hear the responses (Yes, he was very happy with their performance and unfortunately, he did not know if they would be made permanent because the decision was with the higher ups, not with him). This is not to imply that deafs did not have relationships with their normal colleagues because of insurmountable communication barriers. However, they often told me that they preferred to be with their deaf colleagues because they felt more comfortable with them due to ease of communication and a feeling of “deaf deaf same.” They told me that it was easier to share news and information with deafs although they enjoyed “joking” with normals. By “joking,” deafs meant that they did not have serious conversations with normals and that there was less at stake; these were not conversations about the future or about other important topics.

Deafs came to see themselves as part of a deaf group from which they could not be separated. In January of 2010, I met with Aruna, one of the fourteen deaf employees at Phillips Morgan, and I asked her if she would continue to work at Phillips Morgan when the six month contract expired. She told me that she was not sure because she did not possess the necessary qualification to become a permanent worker. For this, she said that a higher degree, such as a Bachelors of Arts or Bachelors of Commerce degree, was required, and she only had an Industrial Training Institute (ITI) certificate. I asked about the other deaf workers as some of them had higher education degrees. In response, she told me: “Phillips Morgan will not hire just one or two people from the deafs as we are a group and if one or two of us are hired and the others are not, we will all feel sad.” I was not sure if Aruna’s perception of the situation was correct and if Phillips Morgan would in fact decline to permanently hire individual members out of the fourteen deaf employees. However, Aruna’s comment is interesting in what it means for how deaf employees view themselves as well as their relationships with each other and with their employer: they see themselves as a deaf group.

While I was also unsure if Aruna would really feel sad if other deafs were hired and she was not, I did know that it would certainly represent a rupture in the current deaf order as these deaf workers had been together through their training at Vision and as employees at Phillips Morgan where they worked side by side and took breaks together. Most of these young adults, all men with the exception of one woman (Aruna), had known each other for many years. In addition to attending the same BPO training program in Bangalore, some had also attended the same three year diploma program at JSS Polytechnic for the Physically Handicapped (JSSPPH) in Mysore, and others had attended the same primary and secondary schools in Kerala where they had shared living and classroom space. Some of these young men currently lived together in a small rented
flat and spent both work and free time together; they were intensely a part of each other’s lives.92

The fourteen deaf at Phillips Morgan were quite lucky in that they all operated at similar performance levels and were adept at meeting their work quotas early in their shifts and thus spent their remaining time socializing and taking breaks together. There were occasional personality conflicts as certain deafs were seen as being dominating or unprofessional (they joked around or gossiped too much) yet for the most part, they productively engaged in sameness work. In contrast to this cohesive batch of deaf workers, I spent time with another group of six deafs that had been placed by Vision at an MNC named Pinnacle. These deaf were from an earlier Vision BPO training batch and like the batch placed at Phillips Morgan, they were also a diverse group from states all over India, educational backgrounds, and life experiences. In this batch the deafs also possessed varying skill levels and sign language abilities. One of the trainees-turned-employees, Bharath, had attended normal schools growing up and therefore had a limited understanding of sign language. He had a very difficult time following the initial training after induction into the company. A BPO trainer from Vision, who acted as an interpreter during the six week training period, helped ensure that he was able to follow and understand by spending extra time with him. Bharath’s batch-mates also helped by explaining things to him during breaks. However, after a few months, the project that they were working on changed and Bharath again had difficulties.

When Vision heard that Bharath was having problems, they called (via SMS) all of the deaf employees to come to Vision one Saturday although not all of them came. I happened to be there that Saturday and I watched as Vikas, one of Bharath’s colleagues, (seemingly) patiently sat with him and helped to interpret in a conversation between Bharath and a few Vision trainers who were trying to troubleshoot and understand why Bharath was having problems understanding the new work project. While Bharath was not able to understand the sign language used by Vision’s trainers very well, he was able to understand Vikas (who had much experience signing with a wide range of deaf people) and so Vikas served as a relay interpreter of sorts, changing words and using very simple signs in a slow manner. Vikas spent a few hours with Bharath and the Vision staff trying to help Bharath understand the new project. At the end of the day, the Vision trainers instructed Vikas to continue to help Bharath. I observed one trainer telling the others that the other four deaf workers also helped Bharath by sitting with him during tea breaks and lunch time and explaining things to him when he needed help. This trainer stressed the fact that the deaf workers were interdependent and functioned as a cohesive group (and this also meant that Vision trainers had to do less work as they could rely on deafs helping each other).

The Ambivalent (But Resigned) Group Member

The following week I met with Vikas alone and asked him how he felt about helping Bharath and he was less than enthusiastic. He said that he had to repeat things for him constantly but that he had no choice. He said that he was obligated to help Bharath as they were both deaf and they had been hired together: “Even if the best deaf is excellent,

92 In fact, as of Spring 2010, the Phillips Morgan deaf group has been dispersed to different areas of the company’s BPO processes although the deafs are still working in small groups of two or three in normal units.
if the worst deaf is terrible, the company might decide to get rid of all of us.” While Vikas accepted the responsibility of helping Bharath as a result of what he describes as “deaf-deaf same”-- he must help Bharath because they are both deaf, were hired at the same time, and will be collectively evaluated-- his statements echoed the sentiments that Aruna highlighted as well. That is, deaf employees see themselves as members of a deaf group and they believe that they are seen this way by others.³ Vikas lived with a group of other young deaf men although he was the only one in the group who had not attended JSSPH in Mysore and so was a bit of an outsider. He was also the only deaf from Tamil Nadu while the others were from Kerala and Andhra Pradesh (and they had all met and spent three years together in Mysore). I asked him how he felt about constantly being with these same deafs and he said that he initially found it difficult to communicate with the other deafs because he was from Tamil Nadu. Slowly he became friends with the others, although he stressed that they were not close friends. Vikas said that when he found out that he would be working with them after spending so much time with them in the BPO training program, he felt unhappy as he did not really feel a sense of attachment to them. Yet despite not feeling connection, he knew that he had to “adjust” because he understood the stakes of being part of a deaf group (as they could potentially be fired together)-- and so he went to Vision on a Saturday to help Bharath.

Producing the Deaf Group Through “Sameness Work” and the Same Work

And what effect does this have on the deaf workers besides the obvious: limiting individual deafs’ advancement options and creating unhappy yet resigned deafs like Vikas who come to feel responsible for their deaf colleagues? Here I want to draw on the work of Emile Durkheim (1964, 1966) on the organization of labor and the effects of different kinds of organization on social formations. For Durkheim, social association is mediated by labor solidarities. Durkheim distinguishes between two kinds of solidarities, or social glues: mechanical solidarity, solidarity by/through similarities, and organic solidarity, solidarity by/through difference. In societies characterized by mechanical solidarity, resemblances bind the individual directly to society and this bond is maintained through participation in shared rituals and other affinity-creating events. All individuals ostensibly do the same tasks and are thus replaceable. For Durkheim, mechanical solidarity occurred during pre-modernity. In contrast, organic solidarity occurs in modernity with the division of labor; everyone performs a different task and it is not necessary for members of society to have shared interests or affinities.

In thinking about mechanical and organic solidarities, Durkheim writes: “The situation is entirely different in the case of solidarity that brings about the division of labor. Whereas the other solidarity implies that individuals resemble each other, the latter assumes that they are different from one another. The former type is only possible in so far as the individual personality is absorbed into the collective personality; the latter is only possible if each one of us has a sphere of action that is peculiarly our own, and consequently a personality” (Durkheim 1966, 85: emphasis mine). While Durkheim was talking about entire societies and not groupings within societies, I contend that this distinction between mechanical and organic solidarities is useful to think through in the case of the deaf workers who by and large do the same work and are, as Durkheim states,

³ This worry of being fired as a group was reinforced by Chandra and other Vision trainers who often told deafs that if they quit a job or performed poorly, it would reflect badly on all deafs.
part of a “collective personality” as a result of similar or shared experiences. This “collective personality” is produced and reproduced by performing identical work. I contend that while deaf workers, as in Vikas’s case, occasionally had ambivalent feelings about being part of a deaf trainee and employee group, most were able to engage in sameness work and become integrated into the group.

Here I would like to return to the two conference rooms where deaf workers were set up to work at Phillips Morgan and the loquacious HR executive’s comment about how BPO work has been made more efficient through splicing it up into different components. The deaf workers sitting in the conference rooms are engaged in identical work. In this particular case, they are merging data from one database into another. The work is interrupted only when one person has a computer virus or another has a question. It is also interrupted by deafs checking in with each other to see where others are in terms of their daily targets; a friendly competition around the meeting of targets often occurs. This work environment is similar to the environment of BPO training that was discussed in the previous chapter and both environments are results of the tracking of deaf young adults, regardless of qualifications and interests, into BPO or other computer work. When deaf young adults approach Vision for employment opportunities, they are often told: “You are deaf and so you should learn how to use computers and get a computer job. Computer jobs are good for deafs because you do not need to talk to other people.” And so the sameness work that deaf young adults do around negotiating differences in their attempts to get along with each other-- the privileging of “deaf deaf same”-- is compounded by engaging in the same work (identical labor) and being propelled on the same employment paths. And so it seems to me that Durkheim’s concept of mechanical solidarity can be applied to deaf group functioning.

Normals who Love Deafs

This is not to say that normals did not try to interact with their deaf colleagues and learn sign language. Indeed, I contend that learning sign language and attempting to form relationships with deaf colleagues resulted in ruptures in the everyday routine of BPO work. I attended an orientation session at Pinnacle, another MNC with a large BPO division, in which the process team slated to receive six new deaf workers learned about deafness and some basic sign language from Radhika, DPA’s ITI principal. Radhika prepared a power point presentation about the causes of deafness and the effects that it has on childhood development and educational opportunities. This was well received with much curiosity and many questions. With the exception of one man who had a deaf neighbor these workers had not had any experience with deaf people before. Radhika then taught some basic sign language, mostly focusing on the fingerspelling alphabet so that people could spell things out even if they did not know the proper sign for a word or concept. During this time, the deaf workers were in the conference room next door filling out paperwork. After a month long training and induction period, which they were about
to start, they would be assigned buddies from the group of normal workers sitting in the other conference room (which we were in) through a buddy system.

Towards the end of Radhika’s deaf awareness and sign language training, after learning the finger spelling alphabet and some basic signs, the six new deaf trainees were invited into the room and their normal future colleagues were given simple questions to ask them using sign language and gestures: Where do you live? Where did you work before? What is your mother’s name? And so on. The room was filled with laughter as the normal workers fervently tried to communicate and the deaf trainees nervously tried to understand. Afterwards Radhika and I asked a few of the normal workers how they felt about their new deaf buddies and they were very excited although also anxious about the limits and possibilities of communication and relating.

I contend that these spaces of deaf-normal encounters are ruptures within the corporate framework and they are productive for the corporation. Deaf-normal encounters create novel experiences and make the workplace a more affective space-- for the hearing workers. I was told time and time again by the hearing workers whom I met how competitive and cut throat these workplaces are, how people are always evaluating themselves in relation to their colleagues, how hard everyone must work in order to get ahead, and how there is a general sense of pressure (also see Upadhya and Vasavi 2006, 2008, Biao 2007). The deaf workers represent a break from this stressful everyday routine as Rebecca, an earnest young trainer at Phillips Morgan, told me when I asked her how she felt about training the deaf staff and subsequently working alongside them: “We forget about the world outside, they make me feel like I am back in college.”

Rebecca also said that she felt like the deaf workers were nice and innocent: “they are like big babies.” I do not think that Rebecca meant her statement to be condescending or offensive. She was imparting the fact that unlike normal colleagues who she was constantly competing with and felt guarded around, the deaf workers appeared simultaneously vulnerable and non-competitive. They were different from the normal workers that she was accustomed to working with. I would argue though that Rebecca’s interactions with her deaf colleagues was influenced by the fact that deaf workers treated Rebecca with respect as she was senior to them, she was a permanent worker, and she was normal. In addition, Rebecca was not privy to the full range of deaf communication due to both language barriers and the fact that deaf workers often stopped what they were doing when she entered into the room. Rebecca may have been touched by the respect offered to her, respect not offered by normal colleagues as a result of her young age and quiet demeanor.

Rebecca told me that she felt personally responsible for the deaf workers and that she wanted them to succeed and do well. According to the deafs, she would often visit the conference rooms and inquire about their lives and ask them about what they did over the weekend using simple signs that she had learned or by writing things down. During the time that I visited and the internet was down, Rebecca hung out in the conference room gently teasing the deafs about their romantic lives. According to Aruna and a few other deafs, REBECCA DEAF LOVE or “Rebecca loves deafs.” They proudly told me that Rebecca attended a large function in December 2009 to celebrate Vision’s anniversary. Deafs told me on many occasions about normal people who loved deafs and they used the word “love” in the sense that these were normals that cared about and were interested in communicating with deafs. Usually these were normals that learned sign language and
learning sign language was seen as a sign of caring, or love. There was an affective
dimension to “love” that transcended other relational terms like “respect” or
“understand”—“love” is bound up with a sense of responsibility as well as an orientation
towards learning sign language. Yet, saying that “X loves deafs” serves to further
produce deafs as a homogenous group because it is a categorical statement.95

During one visit to Phillips Morgan, I also spoke with the deaf workers’
supervisor and he told me that he thought that it was “inspirational” to have the deaf
workers there and that he felt that it was good that Phillips Morgan was giving them an
opportunity to work as “these people deserve to have opportunities too.” He told me that
he felt that deafs work harder than normals and that they do not gossip as much because it
is not possible for them to gossip and work at the same time (since they cannot sign and
type simultaneously). For the deafs’ supervisor and for Rebecca, the young trainer who I
discussed above, their experiences with their deaf colleagues and subordinates was a
rupture in the everyday work routine and offered opportunities for feeling emotions such
as responsibility towards their deaf colleagues and wanting to help them to succeed,
ispiration as a result of working in such close proximity to those who have managed to
“overcome” the challenge of being deaf, and curiosity about the novelty offered through
learning a new modality of communication, sign language.

This rupture creates value for the normal workers as it offers them new ways of
feeling and relating in the workplace that engender attachments and responsibilities.
Feelings of responsibility and admiration emerge. By value here I draw inspiration from
David Graeber (2001) who attempts to lay out a humanistic and socially driven analytic
of value which depends on “creative action,” which I would argue is unexpected and
unplanned. I contend that through deaf-normal encounters, normal workers are able to re-
envision and re-invent their everyday workplace experiences through their interactions
with deaf workers. In this sense, they were re-orienting their expectations and
understandings about both deaf people and the workplace. This affect created by working
with deaf people differs from the “emotional labor” that Upadhya and Vasavi (2008)
suggest that BPO workers engage in because it is not managed.

According to Arlie Hochschild (1983), “emotional labor” “requires one to induce
or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper
state of mind in others” (Hochschild 1983, 7). Emotional labor is oppressive and requires
the worker to package and market her emotions. While normal workers in BPO
corporations may engage in “emotional labor” in their interactions with their international
and domestic clients, their feelings for their deaf counterparts appeared not to be
managed or cultivated. These feelings of responsibility, inspiration, and “love”
represented a break in the everyday monotony of “feeling rules” in which workers are
required to express certain authentic feelings such as gratitude or happiness towards
customers or managers (ibid, 56). The production of this form of value is unintended and

95 It is interesting to contrast and compare Rebecca’s “love” for deafs, and the deafs’ discussion of this and
other normals’ love for deafs with recent work by Joan Ostrove and Gina Oliva on d/Deaf and hearing
relationships. Ostrove and Oliva conducted focus groups with d/Deaf women in the United States and
found that for these women, what was most important for them was communication and respect; these
women wanted their hearing friends to look beyond their deafness and appreciate their individuality
(Ostrove and Oliva 2010). In contrast, it seems to me that Aruna and other deafs did not have any
expectation of Rebecca or others looking beyond deafness—after all, they love deafs. Deafs did however
want normals to learn sign language and willingness to do so was perhaps the primary indicator of “love.”
goes beyond the feelings of loyalty to the corporation that corporate HR executives hoped to cultivate, as per the “official” rationale for hiring disabled workers, which I discussed earlier in this chapter. Normal workers felt loyalty towards their deaf counterparts and not just towards the corporation.

In light of my previous discussions of how deaf workers both see themselves and are seen by others as a group, I want to think about the circulations of affect, feeling, and emotion. Specifically between whom (deafs and normals) do they circulate and in which directions? What are the boundaries of such circulations? As I stated earlier, Aruna told me that Rebecca, her trainer and colleague, “loved deafs” although she did not say that she herself reciprocated and loved Rebecca. In interacting with deafs, I was proudly told again and again that various specific normal people working at NGOs, the government, or different corporations “loved deafs” and this was represented as a good and positive thing because these people cared for and helped deafs. However, I was never told that deafs loved specific normal people or normals in general. In addition, throughout my research period I never saw deaf workers develop close and individual relationships with normal workers. Interactions were always mediated through and by the deaf group. It was only the normal workers who experienced this affective rupture in their everyday relationships with their deaf colleagues. For the deafs, in contrast, their work lives continued to be ordered in the same ways that their social and educational lives have always been: they remained oriented towards each other and looked to each other for support, information, and help.

Consider this as well: December 3rd is International Disability Day and in 2009, Infosys hosted a large celebration and awareness program for all of its BPO workers as part of its “Infyability” initiative designed to promote diversity and inclusion. Those who were permitted by their supervisors to attend sat on steps in the large outdoor amphitheater on Infosys’ pristine and green Electronic City campus in front of a stage covered with banners announcing that it was International Disability Day and featuring inspirational slogans about overcoming obstacles. The masters of ceremonies (MCs) were two extremely perky young workers who over and over again extolled the virtues of disabled Infosians and introduced performances by non-disabled dancers, an Infosys sponsored “inclusive” dance troupe, and skits by non-disabled BPO workers who performed a play about the importance of inclusion and not leaving people out. There was one extremely fast-paced film style dance by a deaf man who shimmied and shimmered to loud pulsating music. After he finished, the MCs declared: “Wow, we never would have known that he was deaf and could not hear the music. How amazing!” Affective value, deriving from awe and inspiration, was being produced right there as the MCs were required to re-orient themselves to the idea of an “amazing” deaf dancer.

At the end of the program awards were given to disabled workers who were “best buddies” to the sound of thunderous applause. These “best buddies” were people who performed well as part of their teams and were considered to be inspirational. While there were around twenty deaf workers present, sitting close together in a group so that they could see the interpreter, it seemed to me that this was more a program for the normal

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96 It was ironic that Infosys was hosting such a celebration because the state of Karnataka had postponed (and ultimately canceled) its annual celebration because the prime minister was coming to inaugurate the opening of a new college and there were to be traffic jams. Thus it is possible that Infosys was hosting one of the few functions in Bangalore.
Infosys workers. It was an opportunity for them to witness, feel good about, and derive value from Infosys’s commitment to diversity and inclusion. And afterwards, the deaf workers and I stood around discussing their concerns about not being promoted. Most of them told me that they desired to be doing something else—such as software or hardware—anything but BPO work.\(^{97}\) When I asked why, many of them said that they did not think there was a future as what kinds of promotions or growth would be accessible to them?\(^{98}\)

### Breaking Free is Impossible When You Have Identical Resumes

When I posed this very question about future career opportunities to an HR executive at Phillips Morgan, he told me that he believed that there were two different kinds of advancement or “ladders to success:” improvement in management of self and improvement in management of others. He said that he thought that the deaf workers could easily focus on the first, that while they might not be able to become managers or supervisors, they could cultivate excellent work habits. Each deaf person would therefore be responsible for managing himself. However, this logic of focusing only on oneself seems to be contradictory to the ways that deaf workers relate to other deaf workers, orient themselves towards each other, and engage in collective pursuit of information, knowledge, and deaf development. Deaf employees collectively fashioned themselves by attending the same training programs, creating identical resumes, and preparing the same answers for employment interviews.

This collectiveness became obvious to me one afternoon while sitting in a small rented flat where five deafs who were waiting for their employment start date at Phillips Morgan lived. With a Telugu movie in the background and a well-used *carrom*, or finger billiards, board sitting next to us, they asked me if I would have a look at their resumes. Each of the five brought his resume over to me and we sat on the floor and collectively perused them. As I scanned the resumes, it became obvious that they were identical and that each of the five had listed the same hobbies and interests—collecting pictures, reading the newspaper, and playing chess. They had also listed the same educational qualifications. I asked them how it could be possible that their resumes were identical. They said that they had all copied from each other and that the original resume had come from a former classmate at JSSPPH. This was not an isolated incident and many times at training centers I observed deafs actively circulating and copying resumes in order to create something, anything, for themselves as the process of writing such a document was alien and confusing to them. As a result, they wound up creating homogenous representations of themselves and one deaf blurred into another (at least on paper).

### Disability/Deafness as a Qualification

However, for one mid-sized Bangalore based BPO/DEO company, which I will call Excel, disability appears to be the only qualification for employment needed: ninety-five percent of its approximately 150 employees are disabled and a large percentage of

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\(^{97}\) Infosys did not have a policy of placing their deaf workers in the same process and so deaf workers were spread throughout different processes. However, deafs sat together during trainings and programs such as this one. They would often plan to meet in between shifts or before their shifts started in order to socialize.\(^{98}\) During my research I did not meet a single deaf person who had been promoted to a management position at Infosys or in another IT company.
this ninety five percent are deaf. In September 2008, I went with Jyothi, a young woman working at DPA, to visit Excel and interview its founder. We had heard much about Excel from deaf young adults working there and newspaper articles extolling its innovative model of providing BPO and DEO service. DPA and other NGOs often referred deaf young adults looking for jobs to Excel. We also knew that it frequently won awards including a national award from NCDE (which Phillips Morgan had also won) as a result of being considered “a BPO with a heart” (Ribeiro 2009).

After a long auto rickshaw ride to a quiet and industrial area of south Bangalore, we reached Excel’s offices. The first thing that we noticed was a banner hanging outside its offices that proclaimed that there were job openings for data entry operators. Written on the banner in large bold letters was: “Physically Challenged Only May Apply.” Jyothi and I looked at each other and wished that we had a camera. After entering the office, I talked to one deaf man who had been working for Excel since it opened three years ago. He told me with a broad smile that Excel used to hire normal workers but that they quickly quit because the pay was low. As a result of this rapid attrition, he told me, the founders decided to only hire disabled people as they do not leave so quickly. After casually telling us this, the young man hurried back to work, as there was much of it to do.

Jyothi and I then met Laxshmi, Excel’s young founder and chief operating officer. Laxshmi told us that they had decided to hire people with disabilities after facing a high rate of attrition and realizing that “for such work, you do not need people with Ph.D.’s. It is not rocket science. The work is often mundane and it requires sitting for long periods of time. People with disabilities can do this work.” She also told us that she had learned that there were many NGOs in Bangalore and elsewhere providing computer training to people with disabilities and that when they finished this training, they needed jobs. She thought that Excel could “fill that gap.”

Laxshmi told us that Excel never rejected a person with a disability. If someone applied and lacked the minimum typing skill and speed requirement, she sent them to either Vision or DPA for additional training. After they met the requirements, she hired them. As such, Excel was the obvious place for NGOs and training centers to refer their trainees as it more often than not hired these trainees and therefore helped these training centers to augment their placement records. Excel was also a place where highly qualified but unemployed older deaf people sought employment after being laid off due to economic downturns and deaf college students worked part time on the night shift after attending school during the day. Through working with disability focused human resource recruiters, Excel attracted deafs and other disabled workers from all over India as it promised work, a hostel (which employees had to pay for), and meals on the job (which again employees had to pay for). Excel is constantly expanding. It has won several new contracts and is opening offices in Kerala and other states. The need for employees is increasing and Excel is searching all over India for appropriate workers with disabilities. Laxshmi is collaborating with HR specialists who specialize in recruiting and sourcing workers with disabilities.

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99 When I visited Excel again in June 2009, Excel had started its own three month training center that people with disabilities had to pay for. They had apparently decided to enter the field of providing computer training. After successful completion of this program, students were guaranteed a position at Excel and tuition was partially reimbursed.
Laxshmi told us that she wanted to empower her employees to overcome their disabilities and to realize that disability was not a qualification for employment. She said that she wanted her workers to see themselves as workers first and to take pride in their work. When I tried to challenge her on this, mentioning the banner hanging outside their offices, which stated that only people with disabilities could apply, she countered that disability was not a qualification and that she felt that a qualification was something that one is proud of. I would argue however, that for Excel, Phillips Morgan, and other such corporations, disability does function as a qualification and a source of added value. Why else would disability be mentioned prominently three times on Excel’s main website page which states:

“95% of our work force are Differently Abled. we are not an NGO but a private company striving to achieve our own sales & a small piece of profit by providing excellent service...by overcoming all our disabilities.” (Excel’s website; typos and bold in original).

Why else would Laxshmi say that Excel never turned anyone with a disability away?

When Jyothi and I asked Laxshmi how she retained workers, she said that she instigated a family like atmosphere. All of the workers were “like a family” and workers told her about their personal problems. Indeed, when Jyothi and I were finally taken onto the floor to observe workers working and interacting with each other, there did seem to be a family like atmosphere and Laxshmi joked and bantered with the workers in sign language (which she learned from her deaf workers and can communicate in quite well). I spent time talking with two deaf women in their late thirties who have been with Laxshmi for the last three years, almost since Excel opened. Prior to working for Excel, they had studied to become electricians at a deaf vocational training center, worked at Titan Watch Factory for five years, and then enrolled in a dental hygiene course although they were unsuccessful at finding dental hygiene work. These two women are now team leaders at Excel where they supervise teams of deaf workers and encourage them to meet the management’s work goals. They enthusiastically gushed about the company and told me that they planned to stay at Excel “for life;” they also told me that Laxshmi “loves deaf people” and they pointed to her excellent sign language skills as evidence of this. The cultivation of an intimate family like atmosphere marked by cross-disability intimacy could be seen as an attempt by Laxshmi to add affective value to the workplace and offset the long working hours and low pay. Family, friendship, and belonging are used to keep workers invested in continuing to work for Excel. Sameness work was therefore productive for Laxshmi.

However, most of Excel’s employees were not as enthusiastic as these two women and their experiences were marked by ambivalence. On one hand, they enjoyed being in a workplace where they could communicate easily and where they felt comfortable, but on the other they also resented the long hours, the extremely low pay, and the lack of opportunities for advancement. As Laxshmi generously permitted me to

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100 These workers’ desire to stay at Excel “for life” is interesting as “for life” is a phrase normally used to describe government jobs. Excel, or more specifically Laxshmi, has replaced the public sector as a source of protection and stability. Ironically, Excel is not a stable workplace and is precariously dependent on the general business climate both in India and abroad.
return to Excel and spend time with workers while they were working and during lunch and tea breaks, I spent a few days sitting with workers watching them scan old offer letters for an insurance company, enter micro-finance loan applications into a database, and struggle to read British census reports from the eighteenth century that they were digitizing. During breaks, I chatted with workers. I asked one deaf woman if everyone who worked at Excel was disabled and she said yes. I pointed out that the managers and supervisors were not disabled and while she conceded my point, her everyday work experience was characterized by identifying and bonding with other disabled workers. The managers lurked on the periphery of her everyday experiences as she had a deaf team leader. At one point, I sat with two women who had been working together for two years. One woman was deaf and the other had a physical disability. The latter woman knew some sign language which she said that she loved using to communicate. I asked them how they felt about working at Excel. The physically disabled woman told me that she likes working at Excel because: “Everyone is the same and has problems. They are blind, deaf, and physically disabled. If I worked in an office with normal people, people would be mean, they would laugh at me, but here people are the same and have pappa [pity], for each other.” Both young women had stories of being stared at and ridiculed by normal people and they valued the safe space that Excel provided; it was a refuge of sorts.

Other workers told me that even when they had no work, they preferred to come to the office instead of staying home because it was boring at home and they had no one to talk to. A deaf man who worked the night shift told me that he often came in early for his shift in order to see his friends and socialize. Another young man told me that he would often remain at the office even after his shift ended. Lunchtime felt like lunchtime at DPA or JSSPPH-- an informal and close social space where people sat together and chatted about their lives and shared news. Excel provided workers with a safe space for identification and belonging-- while also extracting labor and demanding significant investments of time and energy from workers. Hours were often longer than industry standards and salaries were significantly lower. There also appeared to be fewer holidays and perks in the form of tea, coffee, and snacks.

Similar to the situation that I discussed earlier in which Vikas felt compelled to help Bharath because they were both deaf, workers at Excel were also often pressured into doing extra work to compensate for other slower workers. On one occasion I saw the floor manager ask a deaf woman who had been working there for over a year to help another deaf worker who had just started and who was quite slow. The experienced worker had been at the office since 8:30 in the morning and since it was after 5:00 in the evening, she wanted to go home. Still, she reluctantly agreed to help the slower woman.

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101 None of Excel’s management or on the floor supervisors were disabled. This fact was extremely obvious to Jyothi and I on our first visit, which occurred on a very hot day. The floor was uncomfortably hot except immediately in front of the fans. In contrast, managers and supervisors sat in air-conditioned offices set apart from the work floor.

102 Throughout my research I noticed that many physically disabled people who worked with deafs were interested in learning sign language. While deafs told me that they did not consider themselves disabled, it was clear that a bond was created when disabled people learned sign language. Deaf people also considered people with physical disabilities to be in a different category from normal people.

103 Pappa was seen to be a positive feeling by everyone I spoke with. It did not mean to feel sorry for but rather to empathize with or feel for.
After all, they were both deaf and in the same boat. Those who left Excel and moved to better paying positions elsewhere were considered to be lucky although they often told me that they felt bad for those who remained. There were also quite a few people who “had enough” and left Excel without another job lined up— they flocked to the three main vocational training centers and asked for another job, practicing typing and hanging out in the meantime.

Desiring Mobility

In spending time with deaf workers working in a variety of sectors, it became clear to me that, in the absence of stable government employment “for life,” deafs were, or desired to be, mobile. However, mobility was restricted by factors including lack of proper education, poor educational qualifications, and discrimination against deafs. As I noted earlier, deaf workers at Infosys talked to me about how they no longer wanted to do BPO work. One deaf worker at Infosys told me that he hoped to leave within a few years and pursue first a career in software development although ultimately he hoped to become a teacher of deaf children. In addition, deafs in other sectors (mostly in manual trades) often told me that they felt that they were taken advantage of by being made to work longer hours without being paid overtime, they were asked to conduct work outside their actual job tasks (such as washing their boss’s car), and that they were not given promotions while normal workers were. I was also told many times that normal workers would not help deaf workers or explain things to them (although there was of course the occasional person who “loved deafs”). Working among normals therefore resulted in feelings of ambivalence and suspicion; deafs were aware of being outsiders.

As such, deaf workers circulated as much as they could in pursuit of something better— although this something better was often impossible to find. Throughout my research I observed that deaf workers, especially those without higher education, were often quite mobile, flummoxing employers’ attempts to establish a stable work force and leaving without following workplace procedures for giving notice or without another job lined up. It should be noted that there was often significant miscommunication because sign language interpreters were almost never hired. As a result, deaf workers were often not familiar with workplace procedures or policies regarding taking vacations or giving notice.

The experiences of one of my interlocutors, Jamie, illustrate both this frustrated desire for something better as well as a typical cycle of workplace circulations. When I met Jamie, he was 31 years old and worked as a graphic design analyst for the past three years. He was incredibly articulate in American Sign Language and loved to talk to me about American culture and fashion. He received his SSLC from a poor quality deaf school in Bangalore and while he was functionally literate in English, he could not read or write in any language fluently. After class ten, he remained at home for a few years and then studied to become an electrician at DPA. He was a poor student there and was not familiar with workplace procedures or policies regarding taking vacations or giving notice.

104 When Jamie showed me his resume and certificate portfolio (which included a blurb about him in a Café Coffee Day newsletter because he was barista of the month), it was obvious that he had falsified some of his certificates and experience letters. He had not completed a BA nor had he attended pre-university courses in Chennai although he had listed these as qualifications. When I asked him about this, he said that he felt that he had no other choice but to create these certificates as otherwise he would not have been
unable to find a job afterwards and so he remained at home for another year. He then found a job at Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) in Bangalore as its first deaf worker. At this time, KFC was not actually allowed to hire deaf workers and so when executives from Delhi came to visit the franchise, Jamie was told not to come in to work and he was ultimately fired.

Jamie stayed at home for over a year again and spent this time socializing with other deafs and watching TV before his sympathetic former boss called him back to KFC. He said that his first assignment was to clean the bathrooms, which he said that he did meticulously in order to prove that he could perform as well as normal workers. He proudly showed me photos of him in his uniform, bent over with arms elbow deep in coleslaw. Working at KFC, despite the rather unglamorous and difficult nature of the work, was seen as a hip and modern thing to do and Jamie still loves to go and eat at the branch where he used to work (even though KFC is quite expensive). Jamie told me more than once that he was the first deaf worker to work at KFC and he was very proud of this fact.

After working at KFC, Jamie also worked at Pizza Hut, Café Coffee Day, and Barista, before returning back to work at KFC again (he said his manager called him back because he was such a hard worker). He then enrolled in a computer course and was hired by a BPO company which he left after a few months. A normal friend helped him to get his current job at a web design company, which he complains is rather static and has not changed in the past three years. All of the original normal workers and his first supervisor have left for larger and fancier companies such as America Online but Jamie can not get hired elsewhere because he does not have the necessary qualifications. He has always been the only deaf person working at his workplaces and he is also the most immobile, he says. Jamie says that he likes learning new professional skills from the normals at his workplace who “love” him yet he spends most of his free time at work instant messaging and chatting with deafs elsewhere. While Jamie has been particularly successful in finding a graphic design job that pays him a decent wage, his story of circulation and his desire for something better is quite typical. This is particularly true for young deafs who have mostly been unable to find public sector employment.

Jamie at Kentucky Fried Chicken Café Coffee Day Current job at BPO

Photos provided to the author by Jamie.

This was not uncommon as deafs often engaged in creative fabrications to make themselves marketable (as in the case of the identical resumes discussed earlier in this chapter).
In talking with Jamie and other deaf young adults I became aware of an ambivalence that many deaf workers had regarding working alongside other deafs. I was told by many deafs that they did not want to work side by side with other deafs because they were afraid that if there were other deafs around, they would “gossip and talk too much and not do work” and they believed that they would be negatively impacted or “spoiled” by working with deaf colleagues. They were afraid that supervisors and normal colleagues would develop negative opinions about deaf people after seeing deaf people constantly interacting with each other. On the other hand, there were many isolated deaf workers who lamented the lack of communication access at their workspaces and longed for deaf colleagues to talk with; they desired workplaces like Excel with large numbers of deaf colleagues (although they hoped to be paid more). This ambivalence illustrates that deafs are often aware of the ways that they position themselves and are positioned as part of a deaf group and they desire for this not to be the case. On the other hand, the alternative is loneliness.

Conclusion
In conclusion, deaf workers are reconfiguring workplace experiences for their normal counterparts and adding value to the corporations for which they work. As deafs are produced as a group by NGOs and corporations, they continue to create and inhabit social, educational, and moral deaf space which is largely invisible to their normal colleagues as a result of language barriers. In addition, they produce themselves as deaf workers who are oriented towards other deaf workers. These normal colleagues often perceive these deaf workers as “innocent” and “inspirational;” they come to “love” deafs. I argue that these normal colleagues are unable to penetrate deaf space as they see only the deaf group as opposed to the distinct individuals who comprise the group. It is unclear whether the work that “love” does is able to diffuse the boundaries between deafs and normals (although Excel’s founder and CEO Laxshmi has been able to utilize and harness this space for her own advantage). In this chapter I have shown that deaf group making serves to create deaf employees who are oriented towards each other as they engage in labor that is productive for their employers. While some deafs may be ambivalent about their role within deaf groups, they engage in sameness work in order to orient themselves towards their deaf colleagues, adjust to differences, and render themselves part of the group. In addition, deafs often perform the same, or identical, work and this further serves to produce feelings of “deaf deaf same.”
Chapter Five: The Church of Deaf Development

“Deaf are all equal. Let the normals fight over Christian, Muslim, Hindus, deaf cannot fight over this. For deaf, there is only one god. Which god, we don’t know. For 25 years we have practiced this. There is no religion allowed at [TAD]. I am Christian but I am Christian in my own home. Here you study. Outside you are free to go to whatever religion you want to. But not here” (Mrs. Jacobs, Trustee and Administrator of Technical Association for the Deaf Program).

“There is a problem because there are these banners put up by people from your country who say that they can make [disabled] people hear, see, and speak, and deaf children see this and they go to church and are forced to convert. I have seen this here, Bombay, Chennai. This is why many Hindu NGOs don’t encourage people like you to come here. We had a case where Germans said that they were doing their Ph.D. and we let them stay here for 2 months and they were missionaries. So many missionaries are here” (Principal Rao, National Deaf School, Bangalore).

Unexpected Church Circulations

I did not travel to Bangalore expecting to conduct research on deaf circulations between different churches. Before arriving in Bangalore, I did not realize that there were eight different deaf churches within the city alone, a fact that I was told again and again by deaf young adults who listed the names and locations of the various churches that they knew about and regularly attended. There were also deafs who did not currently attend church but who had done so in the past and they spoke of church-going as being part of their past as well as their present “development.” Church-going was a part of most of my interlocutors’ life histories. It became apparent to me that many deaf young adults circulated between more than one church and that these churches played a large role in both creating forms of deaf sociality and providing deafs with what they called DEVELOP or “development” and KNOW or “knowledge.” By development and knowledge, they meant information, skills, and tools for everyday life that were provided in sign language by either another deaf person or someone familiar with sign language and deaf people. More importantly, deafs meant that church provided them with a space to learn sign language, spend time with other deaf people, and have important conversations. Similar to vocational training centers and sites of employment (as discussed in Chapters Three and Four), churches were spaces of deaf development where deaf people learned from each other and experimented with and practiced new deaf ways of being in the world. In this chapter, I argue, following Frank Bechter (2008, 2009) that deaf sociality is a convert sociality and that church-going provides amenable conditions for conversion to deaf sociality.

And so how did I come to know about these churches? One of the first questions that deafs asked me, a foreigner, was if I was Christian, and they often assumed that I was. After I explained, often unsuccessfully, that I was Jewish, I would reciprocate the question and was invariably told that the person that I was talking to went to one of the many deaf churches for FUTURE LIFE LEARN HOW or “to learn for future life.” Among deafs, church-going was discussed “publicly” at vocational training centers and NGOs. On many occasions, I was provided with a breakdown of who goes to which
church at various training centers and BPO offices where many deafs worked. Church-going was a deaf social fact and what was learned in church was discussed as part of everyday conversations and shared with deaf friends, co-workers, and classmates—despite pronouncements to the contrary by NGO administrators such as Mrs. Jacobs in the first quote above.

While I was initially uneasy about these seemingly “public” conversations in light of the tension around church-going and the rise in anti-church violence in Karnataka and elsewhere in India in the fall of 2008, I started to think critically about what these “public” conversations meant in relation to discourse around the importance of relegating discussions about religion, faith, and belief to the private realm (Chatterjee 1986, 1993, Nandy 1998). My interlocutors were not concerned with keeping their church-going private in the presence of other deafs (and they knew that the normals surrounding us would not understand their use of sign language). Indeed, the fact that deaf communicative worlds are distinct from other worlds, often existing in close or overlapping proximity, is why I place “public” in scare quotes.

In this chapter, I explore the work that church-going does for deaf young adults and I look at the articulation of witnessing and evangelizing with existing forms of deaf sociality. I analyze the possibilities that church-going offers for individual deaf young adults, deaf sociality formation, and deaf development. I also analyze how deaf churches articulate with other spaces such as vocational training centers, sites of employment, and family homes. Continuing the arguments made in the previous two chapters, I argue that deafs circulate between churches and create deaf spaces in ways often unintended by those who run and administer the church spaces. As Gauri Viswanathan (1998) points out, scholarly work on “conversion” tends to focus on missionaries themselves and “uni-directional flow[s] of activity.” With such a lens, analysts miss the transactions and exchanges which take place between missionaries and subjects (Viswanathan 1998, 42). In taking Viswanathan’s important point to heart, I focus here on the perspectives of deaf church-goers and I play close attention to communicative, moral, and social transactions and exchanges. In doing so, I briefly explore the history of missionary education for the deaf in India and my interlocutors’ experiences with such education. I then look at the constellation of deaf churches in Bangalore.

Before continuing it is crucial that I make two analytical points. As Jean Comaroff (1991) writes about the work of missionaries in South Africa: “It was through conversation rather than "conversion" (at least, in its narrow, institutional sense) that the church had its impact” (Comaroff 1991, 15: emphasis mine). Comaroff makes the important point that the work of the missionaries was not confined to religion in a narrow westernized sense but that new forms of discursive authority were introduced to South

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105 As the second quote by Principal Rao that I started this chapter with foregrounds, there is often much fear and suspicion directed at churches and missionaries in Bangalore. While there is a troubled history surrounding this, the past two years in particular (as a result of the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party in the state, growing economic disparities, and a Kannada nationalist movement in reaction to the influx of migrants from other states), have seen much anti-church violence. In response to these tensions, the Karnataka state government has toyed with the idea of establishing an anti-conversion law in the state. Church-going was therefore a sensitive topic. When the administration of DPA found out that I was asking questions about church-going, they became extremely suspicious of me and there were allegations made that I was a missionary and that I had come to Bangalore to convert deafs—thus underscoring the sensitivity of this issue in normal worlds.
Africa. As a result of constant encounters with this discursive authority, natives learned new rationalities, ways of fashioning themselves, patterns of work, and ideas for the future. Comaroff suggests that it is not actual belief in Christianity that was important but rather the authority that was introduced through it. As Comaroff writes: “In fact, the people were not necessarily persuaded by the sacred narrative; indeed, it is difficult to imagine what, at the outset, they might have understood by it” (ibid, 10). Comaroff cautions us about making arbitrary binaries between “religious” and “secular” as in some cases there can be no such distinctions made (ibid, 2).

In taking direction from Comaroff, I am interested in what kinds of discursive authority are introduced and through this discursive authority, what new forms of being in the world emerge. I argue that for deaf young adults, church-going leads to a desire for, and focus on, the importance of understanding communication in sign language as well as specific social and moral ways of behaving. Church-going converts deaf young adults to the legitimacy of deaf sociality. In this way, I suggest that witnessing, evangelizing, and church going can have unintended consequences— that is, they convert deafs to deaf sociality and orient deafs towards each other and the importance of sign language.

Deaf Schools, Churches, and Colonialism

First I turn to a discussion of missionary schools established to educate the deaf, as these schools often provided deaf people with their first encounter with Christianity. Attending these schools created conditions of HEART-OPEN, “open hearts,” or being interested in attending churches. As is the case elsewhere in the colonized world, the church has long been involved in establishing schools for the deaf as part of its civilizing project. The first school for the deaf in India was established in Mazagaon, Bombay by the Roman Catholic Mission in 1884 and while this school is still in operation, it is no longer a residential school. The Church of South India (CSI) established two residential schools in Tamil Nadu in 1896 and 1912 in Palayamkottah and Chennai respectively under the auspices of the Zenana Mission Society. These schools were established after a letter was sent “from the deaf of England and America to Queen Victoria, begging her majesty to do something for the deaf of India” as they had heard that the sole school for the deaf in Bombay was only for the sons of rich families (Morgan 1947, 66). As the former CSI principal, Elizabeth Morgan, wrote about her work with deaf children in Palayamkottah:

Travelling by rail in India recently, I met a stranger to whom India was a new land, full of interest, and she talked incessantly about things she had seen and heard since her arrival.

Presently she remarked: “We send missionaries to India to make these people Christians. Is that fair? Do you not think they ought to be allowed to keep to their own religions?”

I replied that nobody could make another person a Christian. Jesus Christ came into this world as the Light of the World, and all that we Christians could do was to let the Light shine, wherever we were. People accepted or rejected it of their own free will. Was it fair to withhold the Light of the World from any in that world?
“What do you mean by “Light”’? she asked, and by “letting it shine”? So I told her about the Indian deaf and dumb children, who because of their handicap, were cut off from fellowship, despised by society, living in the darkness of ignorance. Some of these children, through the love shown to them in a Mission School started for their aid, were now happy and useful citizens” (Morgan 1947, 9).

I have chosen to quote this paragraph at such length because it points to some of the tensions and ambiguities inherent in missionary education. India has a history of missionary involvement in education for all children, not just deaf children, and such involvement was considered part of a “strong civilizing and educational effort” and the “white man’s burden,” aimed at bringing civilization to the natives (van der Veer 2001). While this was a broad education project with the intention of creating modern subjects, the stakes of missionary deaf education, due to very concrete issues around communication, language, and social stigma, are quite different from what Viswanathan writes about in her discussion of the ways that missionary schools utilized and taught English literature to create “secular” modern Indian subjects (Viswanathan 1998). Unlike normal Indians, language (and literacy) cannot be taken for granted for deafs. In addition, as I hope to emphasize throughout this dissertation, deaf sociality functions in such a way that “individual choice” is informed by social dynamics and orientation towards other deafs. As I will discuss in this chapter, becoming “happy and useful citizens” within deaf sociality requires deafs to be sign language users who are oriented towards each other.

Also in south India, the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary established the Little Flower Convent School in Chennai in 1926. The Montforte Brothers founded the St. Louis Institute for the Deaf and Blind in 1962 as a brother school to the Little Flower Convent School. These four residential schools (these two Catholic institutions and the two Church of South India schools mentioned above) provide education and services to deaf children, as young as three years of age and their families. As churches and private donors fund these institutions, they are free of cost or have extremely low fees-- therefore making them accessible to most children regardless of how poor their families are. In addition, both the Little Flower Convent School and CSI Palayamkottah have established vocational training centers and old age homes for deaf women and can thus be considered to be “total institutions” (Goffman 1961) where deaf girls and women can spend their entire lives; a deaf institutional world has been created. These four church-founded schools have historically been considered to be India’s best deaf schools and children from all over India have traveled to Chennai to attend them. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the administrators of these schools, particularly of Little Flower Convent, have played a key role in implementing oral education in India and work closely with the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) to set policy.

During visits to the CSI deaf school in Chennai, Little Flower Convent, and St. Louis, I met deaf students from all over India who were living in the schools’ residential facilities. In talking with students, it was obvious that they often had complicated relationships with Christianity and the relationship between learning about Christianity and learning in general was ambiguous. At CSI in Chennai, students attend prayer services in sign language and there is also a daily morning prayer. At Little Flower
Convent and St. Louis, there are morning prayer services for all students although only Catholic students are required to attend mass on Sundays. When I asked students of all backgrounds how they felt about attending church, they were invariably enthusiastic and said that they enjoyed “learning for future life.” I was told again and again that church taught “good behavior” and “good paths toward the future.”

Yet this learning often resulted in tensions with their families when they returned home for holidays and summer vacations. The residential setting of these schools provided deaf students with different parameters for acceptable behavior and habits in addition to new ways of communicating in sign language. Tensions over what deaf students learned at school often came to the fore around issues of food norms and taboos. Sushma, one CSI Chennai alumna in her late thirties from a Kannadiga Brahman family told me that her parents reluctantly sent her to CSI in Chennai because they were unaware of other suitable schools in Bangalore at the time. She enrolled in the CSI school when she was six years old and she started eating meat because it was served at the school; she “developed a taste for it.” When she returned home for the holidays, she said that she climbed over the fence separating her families’ house from the house next door and the auntie in the next house gave her chicken to eat. She would quickly eat it and then chew a clove to disguise the smell-- although she said that her mother always looked at her suspiciously when she returned. I heard similar stories from other graduates from CSI who said that while their families were strict vegetarians and Hindus at home, they permitted their children to eat meat and go to church at school. (And subsequently, these deaf children developed a taste for it, as Sushma did.)

Tensions also revolved around church-going and whether or not deaf children could attend church when they returned home from school during holidays. Sushma told me that she enjoyed going to church at CSI and learning there and that her family knew that she was going to church and while they did not like it, they were resigned to it. What choice did they have? They had sent her away to school and so she was out of their control. A twelfth standard student currently enrolled at CSI in Chennai who has been there since he was quite small told me that he has grown to love the church and Jesus although his parents are Muslim and they told him that he is not permitted to follow Christianity. He said: “At home I am Muslim, in school I am Christian.” For this young man and others like him, attending such residential schools resulted in negotiations around church-going, eating norms, and their relationships with their families’ practices at home; home and school were two different worlds.

Many of the students whom I spoke to at the Chennai residential schools spoke about having an “open heart” and being interested in learning about Jesus and about Christianity-- this “open heart” seemed to be a sign of openness to learning about church and openness to attending and circulating between multiple religious spaces. This “open heart” also seemed to exist in opposition to the closed heart that characterized families who could not communicate with their deaf children; it therefore served as a critique of families’ closed hearts. In addition, the “open heart” allows deaf people to seek out deaf development in multiple spaces, including churches.

The Bangalore “Open Heart”

This “open heart” was also found among deaf young adults, most of who did not attend residential schools, in Bangalore. Here I would like to provide some background
on the emergence of deaf churches as social, moral, and learning spaces in Bangalore. Compared to other Indian cities, Bangalore was unique in the sheer numbers of church options available. While none of the six deaf schools in Bangalore were directly founded by missionaries, there was church presence: Belgian sisters from Little Flower Convent came to Bangalore in the 1960’s to help with the founding of the Sheila Kothavala Institute for the Deaf (SKID), and in the 1970s, a much loved normal Canadian Roman Catholic priest named Father Harry came to Bangalore to start an exclusively deaf vocational training center and teach sign language.

In researching the deaf social and religious landscape of Bangalore over the years, I learned that before the 1980s there was not much missionary activity directed at the deaf and that deaf social and learning spaces revolved around school, sporting events, and occasional drama events. There was, and still is, the Bangalore Deaf Association (BDA) which started as a social and advocacy organization in the 1960s and which is affiliated with the Pan India Deaf League and the All India Sports Council for the Deaf. While BDA still exists, it is not popular with young adults who feel that most of the attendees are older and that the leadership is out of touch with the reality of current deaf experiences. In addition, the BDA has come out strongly against deaf youth going to churches. Its president has very harsh words for missionaries and church-going deaf youth who he mocked by saying: “They talk again and again about open hearts for Jesus. But is the church going to find them a job? Does an open heart lead to a job? Will Jesus give them a job?” For BDA’s president, there was no benefit to be derived from church-going although it was clear that most deaf young adults did not agree with him (and there were also cases where connections made at church resulted in a deaf person finding employment).

In the 1980s a deaf American Baptist missionary named Bryan came to Bangalore, established his own deaf church, and began recruiting deaf youth for it. He was pleasantly surprised by the fact that he was able to communicate with the youth in American Sign Language and he set about teaching them the good news in small groups and taking them on trips around Bangalore. By the early 1990s, he also established his own mission school in the city although he left after a few years for a nearby hill station where he was offered more space and land for his school. After Bryan’s departure from Bangalore, Anoop, one of his first recruits who trained at a Bangalore based bible college to become a pastor, took over in his stead. Slowly, more deaf churches and church programs directed at the deaf started springing up. The Church of Jesus Christ of the

106 While every Indian city that I visited had at least two deaf churches, eight was by far the largest number. This may mirror trends in Bangalore’s Christian population in general. According to the 2001 national census data, Bangalore had more than double the percentage of identified Christians in the city than the national average. In addition, Bangalore is known as the “city of churches” and Christianity preceded the arrival of the British in India. By the 1930’s, Bangalore had an urban Christian population of over twenty percent, the largest concentration in India. As Janaki Nair (2005) writes: “The skyline of the cantonment included churches of every denomination to meet the needs of European sects and Indian converts alike” (Nair 2005, 37). With the emergence of “new” evangelical and Pentecostal churches, the skyline has remained the same but one only has to scan the storefront signs to see that there has been a change.

107 As I discussed in the introduction, Father Harry is widely known to be responsible for the introduction of American Sign language (ASL) to Bangalore. As a result of Father Harry’s work, Bangalore is the only city/place in India where American Sign Language is still taught and utilized (although as I have discussed in the introduction, it is not American Sign Language (ASL) but rather the ASL alphabet. Deaf Bangaloreans mostly use Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language).
Latter Day Saints sent an American deaf family on a mission to Bangalore, the Jehovah’s Witnesses started learning sign language from videos and DVDs sent from Pennsylvania and Brooklyn, and a deaf Korean pastor arrived in Bangalore and drove his scooter around looking for deaf recruits for his church. A deaf man from Coorg in Eastern Karnataka and his family converted to Christianity and moved to Bangalore where they partnered with an evangelical church and an American funded chronological bible storytelling project which started providing deaf pastoral training and church services. And then there is also the deaf Tamilian preacher who came to Bangalore twice a month and the small sign language fellowship attached to an international evangelical community called the International Fellowship.

Unlike the missionary schools which I briefly discussed above, these churches were not the same kind of “total institution” (Goffman 1961) and the landscape of encounter is different in the sense that the lines between “us” and “them” were blurred. This was not a clear cut, cut and dry process of colonial invasion but in many cases it was deaf Indians reaching out to deaf Indians; many of the pastors or bible teachers were the same age as those who they were teaching and “deaf deaf same” was often invoked to explain why it was important to teach the Word to other deafs. Furthermore, while some churches did provide help for deaf young adults in finding jobs, they were often more explicitly focused on teaching the Word and creating Christian subjects-- although what
actually happened in practice may have been different than what was intended. These churches focused on creating specific kinds of deaf individuals and deaf socialities that were oriented towards deaf relationships. While teachings stressed the importance of individual choice and empowerment (in the sense of encouraging deafs “to be strong and attend church” and to “do the right thing and bring others to church”), being independent and strong meant being oriented towards other deafs and bringing them to church; deaf orientation was present at all times. These churches functioned as a source of social and spiritual support and they offered deaf young adults both physical and communicative space for conversations in sign language about both moral and everyday conundrums, therefore legitimizing that sign language could be used for such communication and expression. And they were similar to vocational training programs in that deaf people often learned sign language for the first time in these spaces.

The Bangalore “open heart” could be called by fickle as circulations between churches resulted in battles among the various churches for deaf recruits and rumors and gossip proliferated about the different pastors and church services. Anoop, Bryan’s protégé, lambasted Naveen, the young deaf pastor who taught chronological bible story telling, because Anoop said that Naveen had not gone to a proper bible college. The Korean was known to “bribe” people to come to church with money and shoes (imported from Korea) and thus was looked down upon by some, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses lambasted Anoop for providing deafs with meals. Deafs also resisted pastors who they said were strict or disciplinary. In listening to complaints about restrictive pastors who told deafs that they should only come to their church, that they should not hug people of the opposite sex, and that they should come to church on time, it was clear to me that deafs were interested in church as a space of freedom and possibility as opposed to the restriction and boredom that they experienced at home. However, in attending various churches, there were ongoing anxieties about both strict and immoral behavior by pastors. These anxieties articulated with deafs’ anxieties about their own lives and futures; circulations between churches were not dissimilar to circulations between various vocational training centers as discussed in Chapter Three.

Deaf Sociality as Convert Sociality

Before continuing further, I think it is important to discuss the specificities of deaf sociality. Frank Bechter (2008, 2009) argues that deaf culture is a convert culture. As deaf people, ninety percent of them, are not born into signing families, how do they come to value both sign language and deaf sociality? According to Bechter, deaf culture “is “conversionary” and as such, all signers in the cultural community engage in inherently conversionary forums that reproduce this worldview” (Bechter 2008, 67). Bechter looks at the role that stories, jokes, and narratives play in creating a deaf convert culture and he suggests that such narratives often serve to “explicitly invoke the potential of people to be signers and to be valued as such, and which suggest a cognitive transformation necessary for this” (Bechter 2009, 168-169). For Bechter, participation within deaf sociality (or culture for him) requires a shift in orientation towards other deaf people. As deaf people are surrounded by people who are not deaf and who do not value deaf ways of being in the world, creating deaf sociality requires narrative work. Telling stories about oneself, about other deaf people, and about the value of sign language-- and these stories always exist in relation to the broader deaf community-- “converts” both the teller and the
listener to deaf sociality. The role of narrative is already extremely important within deaf sociality as it produces, and reproduces, such sociality. How then does this value placed on narrative and story telling articulate with the narratives and story telling which are part of church-going?

Susan Harding (2000) writes about the relationship between language and belief in her ethnography of fundamentalist Baptist churches in the United States and she suggests that conversion is “a process of acquiring a specific religious language or dialect” (Harding 2000, 34). In addition, “Conversion transfers narrative authority-- the Holy Spirit-- to the newly faithful as well as the wherewithal to narrate one’s life in Christian terms” (ibid). Harding’s argument is that conversion is a process of learning a new language, which results in an inner transformation. This process begins when the “unsaved” listener starts to internalize, appropriate, and ultimately use the language and speech practices of the “saved” (ibid). Through language and new narrative practices, the listener enters into new worlds. For Harding, the process of conversion is often mediation through the practice of witnessing by which the “saved” speaker talks to the “lost” listener. Salvation is a position from which one speaks and lost is a position from which one listens. The speaker configures the experience of the listener as coming from a place of deficiency or lack (ibid, 42). How does such an analysis of speaking and listening map onto Indian deaf experiences?

Deaf young adults in India are already acutely aware of their own “lack” in relation to education, development, and language (see Chapter Three). As their relationships with each other are already mediated by the exchange of information, being a person who speaks, or who has information, is already a valorized position. While Harding writes about the importance of learning a new language or dialect (within a language), it is interesting to think about how deaf young adults in Bangalore are not just learning a new language within a language; they are learning a language, sign language, often for the first time. As this language brings with it certain norms and practices around deaf sociality (it is not just a language), following Bechter, they are being doubly “converted” into both deaf sociality and Christianity. Similarly, Comaroff (1991) suggests that it is not so much theological content that is important for creating new forms of subjectivity but rather engagement with certain linguistic and rhetorical forms (Comaroff 1991, 10). Both deaf pastors and normal interpreters introduce such new linguistic and rhetorical forms through introducing both new signs and new concepts to deaf attendees.

For the purposes of this chapter, I have decided to focus on two deaf churches in particular-- True Bible Fellowship and the Jehovah’s Witness deaf congregation-- although many of the themes and issues are similar for the other churches as well. Both churches feature a mixture of normal and deaf leadership although they differ greatly in form and structure. However, they are similar in their focus on creating pedagogical spaces for teaching attendees both sign language and new forms of knowledge and understanding, encouraging witnessing and recruitment, and their focus on deaf communicative and social ways of being in the world. Both churches, and perhaps all of Bangalore’s eight deaf churches, articulate with and (re)produce processes of deaf sociality. I argue that this is what makes them successful.

108 Note that Jehovah’s Witness kingdom halls are never called churches by normal attendees. However, deaf people often called them churches and so I follow this convention.
True Bible Fellowship

True Bible Fellowship started out as the “underdog” deaf church and was founded around 2006 by a large Coorgi family that migrated to Bangalore after their youngest daughter was bewitched by a neighbor who was jealous of the family’s property. The bewitching caused the girl to run out into the night and tear her clothes off and the family searched far and wide for a cure, going to multiple faith healers regardless of their religious path, until they met a Christian healer who cured the girl. Because of this miraculous healing the entire family became born again. They searched for a church that would be open to working with the deaf as Manju, the father, is deaf. The family found its spiritual home at New Faith, an evangelical church with a charismatic bent spreading rapidly in India. Diya, the eldest daughter, worked as an interpreter at the sole college in Bangalore to provide interpretation and she invited the deaf students to the church.

The family also found out about an innovative American funded program which teaches deaf young adults to tell stories from the bible chronologically and then teach other deaf these stories. In 2007 they recruited a deaf trainee in his early twenties named Naveen to work with them. Chronological bible story telling is a compelling teaching tool for deaf as one of the American coordinators of the program told me: “Deaf love to tell stories and the bible is full of stories.” Indeed, story telling is a significant part of deaf sociality and its articulation with church-going gives both story-telling and church-going more power. When I first started attending True Bible Fellowship in the summer of 2007 there were only around ten or twelve steady attendees-- Manju and his daughter Diya, some young unemployed deaf men from a town just over the Tamil Nadu border who Naveen had conducted outreach to, a few lower middle class manual workers from Bangalore, and some of Diya’s students from the college where she worked and their friends (who initially came out of loyalty to Diya). However, as time went by and as Naveen circulated throughout the city, meeting deafs at bus stations and deaf social events, the numbers of attendees grew.

People also flocked to this church from other churches as they said that Naveen was more open to “question and answer” and that services were more “equal” here and more about “deaf people supporting each other” than at other churches. Many attendees specifically switched from the Korean church where they were initially dazzled by spectacular power point presentations teaching them new English words through the bible, a biryani lunch, and the offer of new shoes although they soon tired of the Korean’s hierarchical way of preaching which they said did not encourage questions or conversation. In October of 2008, I had a conversation with a young deaf man named Narayanan and he was excited to tell me that in January 2009 he was going to switch from the Korean church to Naveen’s church as he saw Naveen’s church as less hierarchical and therefore more encouraging of deaf development and progress. Narayanan saw this move from the Korean church to Naveen’s church as a transformational one that would significantly help him further develop.

Narayanan did switch churches and he started circulating with Naveen throughout the city in search of other recruits and attending weekly fellowship meetings at Naveen’s house where he (and occasionally I) sat around with other young men practicing the telling of various bible stories, discussing the meaning of “good behavior” in relation to oneself, ones friends, and ones family, and planning for future life. We talked about
workplace frustrations and boredom, the importance of not daydreaming or fantasizing too much, the need for more deaf teachers in Bangalore schools and NGOs, and why being humble is good, among other things. In this sense, participation in church-going provided deafs with an opportunity to have important moral conversations and to have these conversations legitimated; after all, they were about church and Jesus.

Naveen played an ambiguous role within Bangalore deaf life as he had a less than glamorous background and many deafs said that it was difficult to communicate with him because of his Tamil variety Indian Sign Language background (although he diligently worked to improve his fluency in Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language). His life trajectory is interesting to consider. He had not received much formal education when he was growing up in Erode, a mid-sized Tamil city where he attended a government school for the deaf. After finishing class ten, he worked as a weaver using power looms for twelve hours a day, which he found to be incredibly boring and repetitive. In search of additional development, he heard about a deaf church in Coimbatore, a city located approximately two hours away from Erode, and he traveled there weekly to learn. While doing this, he learned about the American chronological bible story telling school which had been established in Kerala and so he went to visit for two days. A graduate from this program came to Erode and taught him the stories and how to preach them; he took copious notes in a notebook, which he now uses to preach from himself and to teach others. After finishing his course, he was recruited by Manju and Diya to come to Bangalore.

The pastor from New Faith Church provided Naveen with room and board as well as a small stipend. He spent his days visiting with deafs and teaching them bible, looking for new deaf recruits, and immersing himself in the Bangalore deaf social scene. He was slightly awkward and quiet although he came alive when telling bible stories and his sermons were often created through encounters of Tamil variety Indian Sign Language and Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language as attendees worked with him to create mutually understood vocabulary. Naveen often repeated a story twice during a church service in order to make sure that everyone followed. He also constantly checked for comprehension to make sure that attendees were following his stories. He was invested in making sure that those attending his sermons were able to understand and communicate what he taught them to others. At gatherings at his house, he often took out his notebook and carefully taught other deafs the bible stories so that they too could perform them.

What was so special about Naveen was that he seemed free compared to those that he ministered to like Narayanan who spent his days working at a book binding machine factory, and others who worked at electronics factories, loading coca-cola bottles, making pizza, and stocking mail for DHL. His position as a preacher gave him flexibility and an unstructured day. He told me that he loved preaching as he felt responsible for other deaf, “deaf deaf same,” and he hopes to keep on doing so, perhaps traveling to other cities besides Bangalore and reaching out to deafs in these cities. Preaching providing him with flexibility and mobility.

**Church-Going, Freedom, and Teaching Others**

Traveling, more specifically the freedom to travel and meet other deaf people in new cities and share experiences with them, was valued by most deafs that I met. Attending programs through the church provided deafs with such an opportunity. One
Sunday at church, Naveen passed around an invitation to a deaf wedding that the True Bible Fellowship was sponsoring in a city located a six hour train ride away in Tamil Nadu. Many of the deafs present immediately said that they wanted to go in order to learn what a church wedding would be like as this was a concrete example of what they considered to be “future life;” they were hoping to learn from Naveen, the bride and groom, and from the other deaf church goers that they would meet in this new and different city what a Christian deaf wedding (and ostensibly a Christian deaf marital future) was like. Indeed, in the aftermath of the invitation being passed around, I witnessed tense fights between deafs and their families as they tried to convince their families that attending this wedding would be valuable for them. Such fights also occurred around attending church retreats and outings. In contrast, Naveen was seemingly free without such family tensions to negotiate. Indeed, Naveen’s defiance in the face of his parents-- he left their home both spiritually and physically in his turn to Christianity-- is something that many deafs spoke about and admired.

There were other deafs who spoke longingly of wanting to be like Naveen. Ramakrishna, a man in his late twenties told me that he had attended the American Baptist Bryan’s mission school up until class eight. After dropping out, he worked a variety of jobs, mostly in food service. He told me that he wanted to be a pastor and that he traveled to Kerala, the Kolar district of Karnataka, and Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu in order to preach. Unlike Naveen, Anoop, the Mormons, and the Korean, he said that he was not paid to do this work. He was therefore searching for an international missionary organization to sponsor him. As he was unemployed, he spent his days as an independent unpaid preacher, circulating through the city in search of deafs to administer to and teach about Jesus and the bible. Late one night I unexpectedly ran into him at one of Bangalore’s main bus stations; he was on his way to preach to deaf Muslim young men who he said wanted to learn bible. In the absence of an SSLC certificate, higher education, or employment, teaching the Word became a way of elevating his status. Ramakrishna is not the only aspiring preacher and teacher; there are others who invoke social capital from teaching what they learn from churches and religious leaders.

As I discuss throughout this dissertation, teaching is an ethic within deaf sociality and it serves to elevate one’s status in relation to other deafs. Knowing the Word or chronological bible story telling is a form of symbolic capital and being able to teach it to others provides the teacher with social capital. When I asked Jamie, a young man who attended Naveen’s church why he attended church, he said: “In order to know the stories. It is good to know the stories. This way if someone asks me I can say I know.” What Jamie did not say is that he likes to then tell other deafs the stories that he has learned; I watched him do this many times. Frequently after church I watched attendees compete to help others who did not understand the stories by telling them what they had missed. Attendees constantly turned to each other and asked each other if they understood: “Do you understand?” was a way of expressing care and orientation towards others (as well as establishing oneself as someone who did understand). Deaf attendees were committed to both trying to understand themselves and to helping others understand. And as I hope to demonstrate, church-goers did come to possess certain understandings.

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109 I first met Ramakrishna at Vision’s manual labor training (discussed in Chapter Three) as he was hoping that Vision would help him find a better food service job.

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But what do Naveen and Ramakrishna teach? Naveen’s sermons and Ramakrishna’s teachings are not textual in that they do not involve referring to actual biblical text. Rather, they involve the use of stories, of Cain and Abel, of Adam and Eve, of Jesus on the way to Bethlehem to introduce ideas of what is good behavior and what is not. A usual Sunday service at True Bible Fellowship will include a prayer by Manju, a few sign language songs introduced and led by volunteers, a chronological bible story telling by Naveen, and a short sermon by Diya’s normal husband which Diya interprets for. At the end of the service there is a discussion of how to behave, how to witness to others, and the importance of having an “open heart” to Jesus and God.\textsuperscript{110} After most services, attendees are not able to recite the specificities of the sermon, which always seemed rather dull and inaccessible to most deaf attendees despite Diya’s attempts to interpret, and the stories, which they enjoy watching as Naveen is dynamic in performing them, but rather they are able to share the importance of being open to Jesus.

In contrast, question and answer sessions often involved concrete, specific, and immediate problems and issues: “My parents treat my sister better than they treat me;” “A normal person would not help me kick start my scooter;” “What should I do about lying to my parents about coming to church?” Attendees asked questions and also contributed answers and a moral space was created for grappling with such questions. It should be noted that most of the questions asked related to deafs’ relationships with normals and perceived oppression and injustice. This was therefore a space for struggling with what it meant to be a deaf person living within a normal family with little support. It was during these question and answer sessions that participants became most animated and involved. It was also these sessions that attracted so many people to this church from the Korean church, which did not offer such a space for sharing.

Throughout my year of attending True Bible Fellowship, I noticed that the same questions and answers came up again and again and that after the sharing of advice and tactics for dealing with normals, the main message always seemed to be: “Open your heart to Jesus and bring others to the church.” There was repetition. “Open your heart to Jesus and bring others to the church,” or in other words, Open your heart to deaf sociality and help to create it by bringing other deafs to church, to the place where they can use sign language and have important conversations.\textsuperscript{111} Opening one’s heart to church meant opening one’s heart to deaf sociality (and most deafs had open hearts to begin with).

\textbf{Jehovah’s Witnesses}

In contrast to the rather free flowing nature of True Bible Fellowship, Jehovah’s Witness meetings were incredibly regimented pedagogical spaces. Deaf services were held in a small enclosed room separated by a glass wall from the normal English service. The first time that I attended a meeting in August of 2008 I was surprised by both how neatly everyone was dressed-- young men in dress shirts, ties, and nice slacks and young women in fancy salwar suits-- and by how many deaf people were present who I had not seen before. However, I quickly realized that half of the twenty people present were not

\textsuperscript{110} When I returned to Bangalore in January 2010, I learned that Naveen had broken away from New Faith Church to start his own fully deaf church. Diya’s husband’s sermons, despite being interpreted by Diya, had been difficult for deaf attendees to understand and Naveen felt strongly that the entire service should be in sign language and he wanted to create a purely deaf space.

\textsuperscript{111} Thank you to Frank Bechter for his careful read of drafts and pointing this very important fact out to me.
deaf but excellent sign language users and interpreters (in a city that lacks interpreters). Services were held on Friday night and Sunday morning. On Saturdays many deaf young adults met at the Kingdom Hall to read from the bible together, watch DVDs, or have one on one sessions with either a deaf teacher or with one of the excellent normal signers who were responsible for ensuring deaf participation.

I attended services on quite a few Friday evenings and I occasionally visited on Saturdays to observe and participate in the collective learning sessions where attendees sat with a beginning bible and a (deaf or normal) teacher and struggled to make sense of both the English words, the new signs that went along with them, and the meaning behind them. Present at these Saturday classes were three or four young women who only came on Saturdays. They told their families that they were going to class at vocational training centers or to English lessons because they had not been given permission to attend church nor had they been given freedom to roam. Some of these young women did in fact have computer courses to attend at DPA but they felt that they learned more at the Kingdom Hall than they did at DPA and so they came here instead.

Most of the regular attendees on Friday nights and Sunday mornings were young men who were quite literate in English and they were able to keep pace with, and occasionally lead, the rigorous question and answer sessions at each meeting during which participants read sections of the bible, watched a DVD of the same section featuring a middle aged caucasian American man wearing a cardigan signing in American Sign Language, and then answered questions about what they had just seen and read. More experienced deaf participants encouraged and coached newer attendees in language and behavior and when deafs gave short exegeses of biblical verses (which they painstakingly prepared for and practiced in advance) or answered questions with extended answers, other participants cheered. Attendees constantly provided each other with feedback and corrections; this created communities of learning and practice through question and answer, short sermons, and role plays. The deaf service was a combination of interpretation of the adjacent English service and a distinct service with its own questions and answer structure, role plays, and sign language songs. As at True Bible Fellowship, sociality was created through asking and answering questions. Unlike at True Bible Fellowship, the answers were all to be found in the DVDs and introductory bibles that were used in the meeting. Copying both the content and the form of what advanced attendees and the signers on the DVDs signed was highly valued.

What was also at stake within the Jehovah’s Witness deaf service too was a sense of being part of a transnational experience. As Bima, one of the normal interpreters told me: “Across the world in 230 countries, the same sermon and program is followed. Why? Because Jehovah is the same everywhere.” I also heard this from deaf attendees who spoke proudly of the DVDs that they watched which were sent to them from the United States and who told me that the Watchtower is read at the same time by everyone. There was a feeling of inclusion and belonging within this international world-- which the smiling blond man wearing a cardigan and the other diverse signers featured on the DVDs offered accessible entry into. Deaf attendees in Bangalore chatted with international Jehovah’s Witnesses online, they wanted to study abroad at various Jehovah’s Witness programs, and they also spoke about possibly living at Bethel, the Jehovah’s Witness compound in Karnataka where international volunteers lived.
the vernaculars of English and American Sign Language, an imagined community was created (Anderson 1991).

The first normal person affiliated with Jehovah’s Witness to learn sign language was a wealthy Nepali woman named Monica Shah who immigrated to Bangalore for a few years. Monica enrolled in sign language classes at the Institute of Speech and Hearing and set out to meet deaf young adults. As a result of her pronouncements that she was a “deaf person in a hearing body,” her “love for deafs,” and her earnest outreach efforts to engage deaf young adults, she succeeded in creating a community of deaf people who would meet both at her home for extended study sessions and at the Kingdom Hall for services. While she was the first signer and interpreter, other normals quickly followed suit and learned from her and from the sign language materials used in meetings. As these materials are in American Sign Language, the language used at the Kingdom Hall and by Jehovah’s Witness attendees are a combination of Bangalore variety Indian Sign Language, the American Sign Language used in the DVDs, and the residues of the sign languages that attendees from other places use. Similar to True Bible Fellowship where attendees created a language together, attendees at Jehovah’s Witness also did this although they mostly did so within the framework of American Sign Language and specific American Sign Language nuances, expressions, and facial grammar. The specificity of this Kingdom Hall created language spilled over into other spaces where attendees circulated as well.

A Platform from Which to Critique

In addition to creating new social spaces, learning sign language form and content, and developing new authoritative discourses about sign language and deaf sociality, deaf attendees at True Bible Fellowship, Jehovah’s Witness meetings, and other churches also cultivated a new perspective from which to look at the practices of their families. Specifically, their family practices were found to be deficient, lacking and not understandable. In contrast to this lack at home, church provides “development.” Naveen made this clear to me when he told me about his initial experiences learning about the bible-- he said that he returned home from his bible lessons and asked his father to tell him stories about Hinduism. In response to his questions, his father could not tell him any

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112 Sign language courses at the Institute of Speech and Hearing have long attracted missionaries. While the institute does not have a policy of asking people why they want to learn sign language and teachers are often initially unaware of their students’ motives, I have talked to some deaf teachers who have taught sign language to missionaries and they have expressed some ambivalence.

113 Similar to Rebecca, the trainer and worker at Phillips Morgan who I discussed in Chapter Four, Monica “loves” deafs. And because of her excellent sign language skills, deafs loved her back.

114 The Jehovah’s Witness Kingdom Hall appeared to have more interpreters than any other setting in Bangalore. These interpreters, unlike most other interpreters who I had met elsewhere in India, were deeply committed to translating and interpreting effectively and they were quite skilled. In talking to a few of these interpreters, I learned that they viewed their work as a project given to them by Jehovah and as such it was full of much gravity and meaning; they viewed providing correct and appropriate translation as a way of doing Jehovah’s work. These interpreters had learned sign language from Monica Shah, watching sign language DVDs, and socializing with deaf people. What was at stake here was that translation, or interpretation in this case, involves not only switching between two languages but rather it introduces new worlds (e.g., Rafael 1988). Interpreters, as well as deaf teachers, therefore played key roles in introducing new thoughts and possibilities.
stories. He also told me that he felt that the bible, unlike Hinduism, provided “proof” that it was correct. Similarly, another young man with Hindu parents said that after he started going to church, he asked his mother why she did puja and why she worshipped Ganesh. He wanted to know why. He said that his mother was incredibly distressed by his questions and she was unable to answer him. In response, she told him that she follows the path of her parents and grandparents and that God would punish him for asking why she was doing what she was doing.

(Compare this with the comments of my 25 year old deaf neighbor: I asked her if she was doing puja for an upcoming holiday and she said no. I asked her why and she said that she did not know how to do puja and that her mother has been doing puja in a certain way, following generations and generations of relatives...stopping at her deaf, “closed” ear. No generations to follow.)

This young man told me that he also wanted “proof” for why his mother was engaging in certain practices and he was not given a satisfactory answer. Similarly, other deaf young adults told me that they did not understand their parents’ religious practices and their families EXPLAIN NOT TEACH NOT or “do not explain and do not teach” them about religious practices. The lack (not understanding, not learning, not teaching, not providing proof) attributed to family religious practices serves to augment the authority of the church, which is viewed as being a positive space where understanding, a prized value within deaf sociality, can occur. Thus, the good church, or good deaf community, is compared and contrasted with the bad family and the latter is found to be lacking. Church-going functions as a critique of the (bad) family.

One young woman told me that she felt that the church offered an opportunity for DEEP LEARN or “learning deeply” and DEEP KNOW or “deep knowledge” in comparison to the shallow knowledge imparted at home by her Hindu family: for this young woman, opportunities for learning and knowledge existed because church teachings were provided in sign language by a deaf teacher (and her choice of phrases—“learning deeply” and “deep knowledge”—were also frequently used by deaf young adults in other spaces such as vocational training centers to express a desire for education and development). There was much discussion around not understanding and subsequently feeling bored at home. In contrast, in church, information is provided in a sign language using pedagogical space that makes sense and is understandable. And as many deafs told me, understanding then leads to faith and belief: “I understand and so I believe. It is true.” Unexplained and incomprehensible Hindu practices and rituals are no competition for the rationality and seemingly universal logic of “proof” and “why” that accompanies such pedagogical teachings of Christianity. In Clifford Geertz’s discussion of rationalized religions, Geertz writes:

“Rationalized religions...are more abstract, more logically coherent, and more generally phrased. The problems of meaning, which in traditional systems are

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115 The deafs themselves used the word “Hindu” to talk about their families and while I am aware of the academic critiques of there being a uniform and homogeneous Hinduism (e.g., van der Veer 2001, 26), I am using my informants’ language to show how Hinduism and Christianity are neatly compared and contrasted. This comparing and contrasting seems to me to support Talal Asad’s argument, as discussed by van der Veer (2001) about the universalisation of religion and the ways that Christianity is produced as the “rational religion of western modernity” (ibid).
expressed only implicitly and fragmentarily, here get inclusive formulations and evoke comprehensive attitudes” (Geertz 1973, 172).

Geertz’s discussion takes on heightened stakes when applied to deaf peoples’ experiences of religion in that for them, language cannot be taken for granted and meaning often must be expressed explicitly through sign language.

As I discussed earlier, attending church often resulted in family tensions. In many cases deafs lied to their parents, telling them that they were going to a special school event, to English classes, or to cricket games. Bibles were hidden under schoolbooks and read late at night or early in the morning. This lying resulted in serious problems especially when deaf young men and women met at church, fell in love, and wanted to marry, or when they became serious in their desire to follow church teachings and practices. In some cases, deafs were honest with their parents and this resulted in complicated negotiations over whether they could be permitted to attend church. Some parents permitted their deaf children to go to church as long as they “promised not to convert.”

In other cases, families saw positive changes occur in their deaf children. One family told me that their deaf daughter’s behavior changed dramatically and she became more polite and respectful after she started attending church. Another mother told me incredibly hat she reluctantly permitted her son to go to church because he was previously depressed and sad all the time. After much thought, she also agreed to let her son be baptized, even though the rest of the family was appalled by this turn of events. She said that she saw improvement in her son’s mood and outlook and she did not think that her son could find a sense of peace through lighting diyas, ritual lamps, or ringing bells at temples. However, this mother also told me: “These people [the church] are damn smart. They take advantage of deaf childrens’ minus point and turn it into a plus point for them.” To her, the church was taking advantage of her son’s deafness; this was a commonly held view. What, however, was the alternative? This mother was well aware of her son’s isolation as a result of communication barriers and she could not think of other possibilities. For most families, the issue of church-going often articulated with other issues around communication incommensurability and the ambiguous role of the deaf child within the family. In many cases, church was another space for pulling away from and critiquing the family and focusing on deaf sociality.

While many deafs attended church at one point or another in their lives, there were also some who were adamantly against church-going as they felt that churches were “immoral” in encouraging gender integration and/or they did not want to disrespect their families by turning against their religious practices. A few of my (non church-going) interlocutors used a phrase SIGN BUTTER or “sign butter” to refer to what they felt that pastors and leaders at churches do to deaf attendees: they sign beautifully and in doing so, they “butter up” deaf attendees. This beautiful sign language creates conditions of extreme possibility for becoming, or at least for understanding. Understanding in this context and structure is enough to enthrall someone and to create conditions of possibility for becoming someone else. While quite a few of my informants used “sign butter” as a way of discrediting what deaf people learn in churches (similar to the ways that people talk about brain washing or using bribery to get people to convert), I am interested in taking this phrase seriously as a concept because “sign butter” very obviously results in
understanding what is said. I therefore introduce “sign butter” as an analytic—“sign butter”—which I argue creates opportunities for new moral worlds to emerge as deaf people learn new language and discourses.

While many scholars (e.g., Harding 2000, Rafael 1988, Tomlinson 2009, Hanks 2010, Schieffelin 2000, 2002, Robbins 2001, 2004) have analyzed how the missionary project is very much a language project, I suggest that the stakes underlying this particular language project are different because deaf people are often explicitly taught a language in these spaces, sign language, for the first time. Through learning sign language, new deaf communicative worlds are created and the distinct logics and norms that make up deaf sociality in relation to the sharing of information, news, and stories are propagated. I therefore suggest that perhaps “sign bread and butter” would be a better description as deaf church-goers are gaining something substantial: sign language, authoritative discourse, deaf sociality, and understanding. A new discursive space is created that deafs are able into enter into through church-going.116 I must note that many of the deafs who spoke disparagingly of the church already had good language skills either as a result of unusually supportive families, access to higher education, and/or having financial capital.

Language and Development

I became more aware of how church-going led to “development” and was a language oriented (and thus a deaf sociality oriented) process during my conversations with Zakir, a young man in his early twenties who had attended church since 2005. He had studied at a deaf residential school in Bangalore that is known for its poor management, unqualified teachers, and lack of language access. While the principal of this school was extremely strict and did not let students go off campus to go to church on weekends (see the second quote by Principal Rao with which I started this chapter), Zakir knew about the deaf churches in Bangalore from former classmates. Anoop had also come to talk to students a few times, ostensibly coming inside the school campus before being asked to leave.117 As Zakir’s family lived about two hours outside of Bangalore, he was given permission to visit his family on weekends and on the way back to school he would go to Anoop’s church.

Zakir told me that initially he did not understand Anoop’s signing— he understood neither the sign language nor the content of what was communicated in sign language—but he continued to return to church and slowly he started to understand. After passing his SSLC, he moved into a rented room in Bangalore and therefore had more freedom to go to church related events. He attended Anoop’s Tuesday and Friday night bible study sessions and through repetition— the same thing taught on Sunday was also discussed on Tuesday and Friday nights— he came to understand. And he said that what he learned in church— communication in sign language and English— helped him in school, in everyday life, and in his computer training course at the Disabled Peoples Association. It also

116 Thanks to Frank Bechter for nudging me towards the phrase “sign bread and butter”.

117 The principal of this particular school, the National Deaf School, said that he would not permit any missionaries to come to his school. However, in my interviews with principals and administrators at other deaf schools, I learned that they had a more relaxed attitude about this and would permit missionaries to conduct leadership or cultural program— at least until they received complaints from families. Invariably, when parents found out that their children were interested in attending church, they would complain and then the principals would curtail access.
seemed that his new sign language ability helped to make him more confident in relation to other deaf young adults and I often saw him sharing what he learned at church with other deafs.

For others, going to church replaced the education that they were supposed to get at school. In the absence of learning in school, they learned at church. Nisha, one of Zakir’s former classmates at the National Deaf School who is now also studying computers at DPA, told me that at school, the teachers do not sign and they do not teach and so students do not learn anything. However, at church she learned how to read and write in English as a result of Anoop’s teachings and she has also learned how to “develop” for the future. She told me that she desires to teach others about the Word, about good behavior, and about how to live a good life in the future. Nisha now plays a leadership role at the church and this leadership role also spills over to DPA where she constantly advises other students on the right way to behave and she recruits others to come to church as well. One of Nisha’s computer classmates told me that she wanted to be like Nisha because Nisha was strong and a good role model. She said that she wanted to start attending church as this is where Nisha learned these values and skills.

Witnessing, Dis-Ease, and Confusion

Deafs who attended vocational training programs often witnessed about churches and the Word to those who did not attend church. I observed that students in the new batches at vocational training centers were taken under the wings of current and previous students and these more advanced students would guide the new students to church. Senior students at these centers told me that they felt that it was their responsibility to inform new students, especially those from rural areas with poor sign language skills, about church. I observed one very earnest second year student at DPA tell a new student about Jesus so that he would “know good behavior and good ways.” Deafs not enrolled in training centers would come to witness at vocational training centers during lunch time or after classes finished for the day.

As students often had to travel quite far to reach home, witnessing took place while waiting for the bus, on the bus, and during short interludes when deaf students met for a few minutes on the way home in parks or eating halls in close proximity to bus stops. Any free moment was potentially a moment of transformation and education. On one occasion, I went with three young women who were studying computers at DPA to meet with a young man studying electronics at another training center. He had come to DPA to meet them and the five of us together took the bus to Shivaji Nagar Bus Stand. Once there, we sat down in the attached eating hall, shared a plate of gobi manchurian, or spicy fried cauliflower, and looked at pictures in a Jehovah’s Witness book and learned that God’s name is Jehovah. After about twenty minutes we finished as the three young women had to hurry home. This young man and others like him are fulfilling a dual responsibility: they are doing what they must do both as members of a Jehovah’s Witness

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118 Indeed, traveling on public transportation and through crowded city bus stations offered deafs opportunities for witnessing and being witnessed to. During an interview with a deaf brother and sister in their late twenties, I asked them why they had not known about the deaf churches when they were growing up and they said that it was because their home was so close to their school; they did not need to travel by bus and so went straight from home to school and vice versa.
community and as members of deaf sociality in which they are responsible for sharing with other deaf people what they know.

I talked with these three young women who had been witnessed to a few days afterwards and they told me that they were interested in attending services at the Kingdom Hall although they were in the middle of English and computer courses at DPA. They indicated that perhaps when they were done with their courses at DPA they would go to the Kingdom Hall. However, one of the young women told me that she was feeling confused as another of her friends at DPA had told her that the Korean church was the best church and she had gone there once and liked it. She was confused because the young man who she sat with at Shivaji Nagar Bus Stand, and others too, had told her that Jehovah’s Witness was the best church and provided “deep knowledge” while the Korean church was “simple.” Deafs often said that their preferred church was “deep” or “full” while others were “shallow” or “half.” “Deep” or “full” churches offered more possibilities for understanding and learning. Another young woman told me that she felt stuck because she had friends attending different churches-- the International Fellowship, Jehovah’s Witness, and Anoop’s church-- and she did not want to offend any of her friends and so she did not go to any of churches. Church became a contested social and pedagogical space where there was competition, and FORCE or “force,” better understood as pressure, among the different churches for deaf bodies and souls.119 Deafs often worried about whether going to particular churches would affect friendships (and friendships were affected when people switched churches.) But almost everyone went to a different church’s celebration.

Celebrations and Spectacles

One such example of a big celebration occurred when the Korean church celebrated its ten year anniversary in Bangalore by renting out a large hall and inviting all of Bangalore’s deaf to come by sending out text messages and spreading the word through word of mouth. In addition to the deaf Korean pastor and his family, there was also a group of around twelve normal Koreans (benefactors or donors to the Korean church) who were visiting Bangalore for the function; all wore brightly colored Indian clothing to the event to further add to the festival like atmosphere. The event started with the pastor preaching about the importance of love, respect, and humility-- using his excellent PowerPoint skills to create a dazzling power point presentation. After this sermon, there was feet washing provided by the Korean guests who lined up on stage and knelt before the deafs who came up in groups of eight at a time and placed their feet in large bowls. At the end of the feet washing session, each Korean prayed for and gave the deaf person whose feet she washed a hug and a new terrycloth towel. And meanwhile the rest of us waited our turn, gawked, and took photos. This mela, or festival, provided an opportunity for intimate interactions with normal Koreans in addition to the usual “learning and development.” It also provided yet another opportunity for deafs to compare and contrast their usual churches and as a result of this spectacular function, a few new people started attending the Korean church.

119 This “force” was similar to the “force” felt by deaf people who were recruited to be members of Silver Venture and other pyramid schemes as discussed in Chapter Six. The sign for recruiting someone for church looked like an act of force or pressure: a hand is placed on the other arm and pulls it forward.
While this particular function was perhaps the most spectacular one that I attended (nothing beats feet washing in terms of spectacle), there were many other Christmas pageants, special baptisms, festive fellowship meals and gatherings, and large assemblies. I, and other deafs, would find out about these events through word of mouth at vocational training centers and through text messages. Similar to the multi-level marketing and pyramid scheme melas that I will discuss in the next chapter, these functions served as a place for deafs to congregate, meet other deaf people, and “see and learn.” Deafs were often curious about churches other than their own. These festival-like spaces served as an opportunity to satisfy such curiosities without committing to a church as well as a chance to socialize in a different space (although it was often with the same people). Such functions were ruptures in ordinary deaf life.

Conclusion

And what of the future? A theme running though all of deaf discourse about why church is so important is that deafs are “learning and developing for the future” and that church teaches “how to live for future life.” Yet when I asked deaf young adults what this “learning for the future” meant and what specifically they were learning, they were unable to answer. There was a sense, however, that they were working or learning towards something— that learning, development, and good behavior would have benefits later on. However, I suggest that this future orientation, this struggle over the question of “how to live for future life” results in present-oriented socialities and the creation of an interactive deaf “public sphere” in which questions about the moral circulate and are deliberated upon (van der Veer 2001, 53). While van der Veer sees the public sphere as inherently a political one in which subjects create national identities, I suggest that the deaf “public sphere” in question is not concerned with the national but rather with creating deaf development and ultimately, deaf sociality in the everyday. This interactive space was not very different from the interactive spaces created at vocational training centers, BPO offices, and pyramid schemes. What was different, however, was the (discursive) authority that church offered to those participating in these conversations and question and answer sessions.

Returning to the deaf person who witnesses to other deafs and therefore fulfills the double responsibility of sharing what she knows with other deaf people and spreading the Word, I argue that this double conversion oriented deafs even more towards deaf sociality. While it is not clear who came to believe in Jesus (not that belief is easy to track or discern), it is clear that conversion to deaf sociality took place as deafs improved their sign language, understood new things, and had repeated conversations with other deaf people. Church going therefore created concrete social bonds. Church spaces, through the use of techniques such as question and answer sessions, checking for understanding, and horizontal dialogues, created a moral space in which the same questions (and the same answers) were often repeated over and over again. Deafs left church with the importance of deaf sociality and learning how to be a good deaf person. Remember what Comaroff (1991) pointed out-- it is not so much belief that is important but new discourses, habits, ways of being in the world, and practices.
Chapter Six: Special Friends

“Silver Venture is about business. About 1000 deaf in india join it to earn better n transform our lives” (SMS sent to author by Aparna when asked what Silver Venture is).

“…this business gives an equal opportunity to everyone” (Guide of Destiny (G.O.D) Pradeep Sathi in Second Anniversary Special Friends Video).

On August 1, 2009 I flew to Pune in order to attend a mela, or celebratory function, marking the two year anniversary of special friends’, or deaf peoples’, involvement in Silver Venture, an international pyramid scheme. This mela for the special friends of Silver Venture was the second one held and deaf Indians from as far away as Kerala, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh (over thirty hours, twenty hours, and fifteen hours by train respectively) converged on Pune for this five hour function.\(^{120}\) I accompanied members of Team Commitment, one of Bangalore’s two major teams. Team members came by train and flight from all over India. Expectations were very high as last year’s mela, the first anniversary, had brought almost one thousand special friends to Pune including at least twenty members from both of Bangalore’s teams.\(^{121}\) Throughout June and July at Bangalore-based weekly meetings of Team Commitment, Rajesh, Team Commitment’s young and energetic leader, encouraged team members to come to Pune to “learn and develop.” At one such Bangalore meeting, Rajesh invited Sharad, a shy young art student to explain how wonderful last year’s function was to those team members present who had not traveled to Pune last year. Rajesh set the tone by asking Sharad questions:

Rajesh: “What happened when people talked during the workshops?”
Sharad: “They were told not to talk and escorted out.”
Rajesh: “What happened when Aparna [a Bangalore based leader of Team Wonderful Dream, another Bangalore based team] fell asleep?”
Sharad: “She was prodded and woken up.”
Rajesh: “Everyone paid attention and kept their phones off and in their bags. If people did not pay attention or if they were sleepy, they were touched by their neighbor to have them pay attention.

In emphasizing the focus and attention required of attendees, Rajesh was making a statement that this event was different from other deaf events where deaf people tend to chat, share news with friends, and use their mobile phones to send text messages, unless something particularly interesting is happening. In contrast, these special friends functions are spaces of disciplined learning and attention; they are deaf spaces that are created by and through new forms of deaf entrepreneurship and social and economic

\(^{120}\) I am using a pseudonym for the company and I have tried my best to change identifying details (including the geographic location of where it started and location of the Indian offices). My interlocutors, specifically those in management or leadership positions, insisted that I not identify the company’s name. \(^{121}\) I have not been able to ascertain the exact number of attendees although I have been told by at least seven special friends that there were around one thousand special friends present at the Pune first anniversary function.
practices. In this chapter, I analyze how and why deaf young adults have become special friends. What is it about Silver Venture that is so compelling and attractive for deaf people? What are the stakes of participation within this business for both creating and perpetuating ways that deaf young adults engage in social and economic relationships with others (both deaf and normal)? And what does such participation tell us about what it means to be deaf in urban India today? As Silver Venture is an international business with deaf members throughout the world, I draw on interviews and participant observations conducted in Bangalore, Pune, Bombay, Delhi, Erode, and Mysore to write this chapter. I argue that participation in Silver Venture can be seen as a future oriented social formation offering deaf participants and spectators new ways of ordering time, relationships, value, and hope. I choose to call participation in Silver Venture a social formation and not a social movement because participants do not make claims against the state nor do they work towards a politics of recognition; furthermore it is not a “public” formation in that it is not legible to the public although it very much exists within deaf public space.

Silver Venture, Direct Sales in India, and Direct Sales Versus Pyramid Schemes

Before I return to the 2009 anniversary function, I first explain how the term special friend came to exist and in doing so I will outline the involvement of deaf people within Silver Venture. To begin, Silver Venture labels itself as providing “interactive business opportunities” through direct sales of numismatic gold coins, health products, watches and jewelry, vacation packages, and telecommunications. The company started in Taiwan in 1998 where its headquarters still exist. Currently it has offices in India, Malaysia, Singapore, Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, the Philippines and other Middle Eastern and central Asian countries. It has very little presence in the west.

This history differs from the mainstream history of direct marketing which emerged in the United States after the second world war. Companies such as Amway, Avon, Mary Kay, and Tupperware placed direct selling into the mainstream of American life as housewives sold products to their friends, neighbors, and family (Wilson 2001, Cahn 2006). Ara Wilson (2001) suggests that these companies can be seen as a form of “populist” or “alternative” capitalism that developed and flourished during the blossoming of suburbs during the cold war. She states: “Direct sales’ populism lies in its recourse to “average” people with no special training in sales or marketing, which in part explains its associations with white working class or lower middle class worlds” (ibid, 404-405).

During the 1970s, multilevel marketing companies began to globalize in their search for new markets and additional profits. The developing economies of the global south became a new target. As Wilson (2001) points out, this mirrors globalizing trends of corporations and states in search of both new markets and cheaper labor and manufacturing hubs (although these companies did not actually start manufacturing products in developing countries until much later, if they did at all) (ibid, 407). Both Wilson (2001) and Peter Cahn (2006) provide ethnographic examples of the experiences of direct sellers in Thailand and Mexico who have joined businesses in pursuit of more stable and prosperous economic and personal futures; in their work both scholars highlight how joining such businesses is both a symptom and an effect of increasing economic instability and inequality.
Jean and John Comaroff (2000) suggest that the burgeoning of such businesses and schemes, “a few legal, many illegal, and some alegal” are not new but that there is something about this (current) moment of dramatic shifts in production, the role of the state, and peoples’ expectations which have led to the flourishing of such schemes (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 303). The rise in direct sales is tied to increasing economic and social insecurity: participants desire both sources of revenue and the forms of community created by and through these businesses. As I will show, deaf participation within Silver Venture is related to feelings of economic insecurity, hopes that it is an opportunity to earn money (in the absence of other opportunities), and the sense that it is a deaf friendly business that articulates with already existing forms of deaf sociality.

Amway was the first direct sales business to enter India in 1995 and it began conducting business there in 1998. According to its on-line fact sheet, it has grown rapidly and now has over 450,000 independent business owners. Amway, and other direct sales organizations such as Avon, Oriflame, Tupperware, and MaxLife Insurance, are members of the Indian Direct Sales Association, an independent self-regulatory body that is lobbying the government for more comprehensive legislation to regulate direct selling (Radhakrishnan 2009, Joshi 2009). So, while it is not a government body, the IDSA does function as an independent bureaucracy that provides some legitimacy and oversight. According to a 2009 article in the Hindu on a report attesting to the growth and stability of the direct selling industry:

“With per capita income in India constantly on the increase and middle class families having more disposable income in their hands, the direct selling industry in the country is expected to reach Rs.5,320 crore by 2012-13, up from Rs.3,330 crore in 2008-09, according to a new survey by global consultancy firm Ernst & Young. The direct selling industry could help in women’s empowerment as almost 70 per cent of the people employed in the sector are women, it says.

“Overall direct selling industry grew by 17 per cent in 2008-09, while a 10-15 per cent annual growth is expected for the overall industry in the next 1-2 years...” says the survey conducted in association with India Direct Selling Association (IDSA), self-regulatory body for the direct selling industry in India” (Joshi 2009).

The report discussed in the article goes on to say that despite the recession, direct sales, especially of health products, has a strong presence in India and there are over eighteen lakh people acting as sales consultants or business owners and that 2.2 lakh people are joining yearly (Joshi 2009). This growth in direct sales has coincided with economic liberalization, the decline of government industries and streamlining of bureaucracies, and the increasing acceptability of women financially contributing to the household as well as the emergence of a new Indian middle class (Fernandes 2000, 102). As in the United States where this form of direct sales first developed, many direct sellers are female and they sell from their homes or when visiting family members and friends. Silver Venture is not a member of the IDSA and, using Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2000) analytic used earlier, it fluctuates between illegality (offices have been shut down by the state because of possible fraudulent practices) and alegality (it is usually ignored and is not entirely legible to the state). Tellingly, in its lobbying for government regulation of

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122 A lakh is one hundred thousand. Eighteen lakhs is 1,800,000.
the direct sales industry, Amway India’s CEO specifically mentions the existence of Silver Venture as a reason why there needs to be such legislation and he states that Silver Venture is a pyramid scheme (Radhakrishnan 2009).

According to Daryl Koehn (2001), the difference between direct sales/multilevel marketing, and pyramid schemes is that direct sales are product oriented while pyramid schemes are recruitment oriented. Direct selling refers to the practice of selling products and services through networks of independent agents who receive commissions, dividends, and other forms of compensation. In pyramid schemes, people make an investment and then recruit others into the scheme. When others join the scheme under them, they receive a commission (ibid, 153). For pyramid schemes, value lies in networks and recruiting people. According to this definition, Silver Venture, like many other such businesses in India, is a pyramid scheme (despite the fact that its leaders insist that it is not). As I discuss in this chapter, it operates as a pyramid scheme among its special friends.

My point in making this distinction between direct sales businesses and pyramid schemes is not to split hairs as a business can be both direct sales and a pyramid scheme but rather to highlight the importance of recruitment within Silver Venture. Silver Venture’s special friends make a one time payment of around 30,000 rupees and receive either a numismatic gold coin or a fused glass energy disc (which is supposed to increase vitality when it is placed close to the body) and they are told that neither of these things are as important or valuable as recruiting people for the business. The real value comes from becoming an independent representative (IR) for the business and recruiting others to join under them. While the numismatic coin is supposed to increase in value and independent representatives often told me that they could be sold on eBay or elsewhere for large amounts of rupees, I have never heard of anyone who was able to do this during my fourteen months of research.

How Deafs Became Special Friends

Where did the term “special friend” come from? In a (captioned) video made for the first anniversary function of Silver Venture’s special friends titled “Silent Pathbearers to Success,” Pradeep Sathi, known to his downlines as Guide of Destiny (G.O.D), sits in a massive black leather armchair (just large enough to comfortably seat his large frame) and enthusiastically proclaims: “Hello my special friends I love you!” He continues to say that he prefers to call “those who the world call as deaf” his special friends “because they are close to my heart.” Sathi, who joined Silver Venture in 2001, said that he was always interested in helping “the less privileged.” However it was not until 2007, after he became a millionaire, that he hit on a way to help his special friends: one of his downlines worked with a deaf man, Bhupen, and this downline conducted a “prosperity

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123 I will use direct sales, multilevel marketing, and network marketing interchangeably throughout this chapter.
124 It is unknown exactly how many such pyramid schemes are circulating in India although Amway India’s CEO claims that there are at least 200 such unregulated schemes (Radhakrishnan 2009).
125 30,000 Rupees is $625.00 at 48 rupees to one dollar, the current exchange rate. This is a sizable sum for the middle class deaf Indians targeted by the scheme who earn monthly wages of about 7,000-18,000 rupees.
126 Downlines are people below you in a multi-level marketing business while uplines are people above you.
meeting” (PM), Silver Venture’s term for a recruitment meeting, with Bhupen in which he explained the business to him. Bhupen was interested and decided to join. After signing up, Bhupen went out and recruited other deaf people. In September 2007, there were around thirty five deaf members of Silver Venture living in Pune and Sathi decided to donate an air-conditioned conference room on a weekly basis, provide sign language interpretation for trainings, and to caption Silver Venture training videos. Sathi is considered to be the father and great upline of all deaf teams in India and they speak affectionately about him and his commitment to them. Deaf members in Bangalore often professed admiration for him and his financial feats. Very often members would cheer and applaud when someone used the term special friend at a Silver Venture meeting.

Sathi lives in Pune, the eighth largest city in India and the second largest city in the state of Maharashtra, a surprisingly intimate yet bustling college town, and this is where he first found his special friends. According to Pinky, the wife of a Pune special friends leader named Dinesh, and a special friends leader herself: “Pune is very small and there are one thousand deaf people living within an eleven kilometer radius and this makes it easy to meet people if there is a problem and it can be resolved easily.” While I am skeptical about Pinky’s numbers, this ability to meet in person is extremely important for deaf people as communication is considered more rewarding and requiring less effort when using face to face sign language. Communication over SMS or email also often leads to confusion and misunderstanding due to English language difficulties.

Dinesh and Pinky’s team, the Pune branch of Team Wonderful Dream, meets formally on a weekly basis, usually at Dinesh and Pinky’s house, and it is not uncommon for people within their team to meet daily to “share” ideas, plan, and to develop business. Dinesh said that he matches up successful team members with not so successful team members and that everyone works together and helps each other. Team work, “the power of team,” is stressed and Silver Venture special friends teammates are encouraged to practice their prosperity meetings (PMs) with each other, come to each others’ aid at convincing reluctant potential members, and share their business goals and dreams. Pune is known to deaf people all over India as the place where Silver Venture started for the deaf and the special friends living there have been most successful in terms of turning their social capital into financial capital as they had, and have, all of India’s deaf as potential recruits.

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127 According to one of the few certified sign language interpreters living in Pune, Silver Venture is reliable in paying for interpreters and she told me that it is one of the few organizations which seems to understand the importance of providing communication access. Silver Venture has also hired two of India’s most famous sign language interpreters to interpret for training videos and to interpret for deaf members at a Silver Venture function in Malaysia. These two interpreters have also joined the business.

128 Deafs did not see the word “special” as paternalistic or stigmatizing as those in the deaf and disability movements in the west do. Rather, they saw it as a sign of love and care. Most of my interlocutors told me that Pradeep Sathi “loves” deaf people; this is similar to the way that deafs described Rebecca, Monica Shah, and others in Chapters Four and Five as “loving” deaf people.

129 Throughout my research, deafs often insisted on meeting me in person and often told me that using SMS was confusing or difficult to understand. SMS is utilized mostly for arranging a meeting time or sharing news about upcoming events, but never for discussing problems or concerns.
While Dinesh actually joined Silver Venture under Vicky who joined under Bhupen (the first deaf to join), his joining coincided with the closing of his family’s manufacturing factory and subsequent times of economic uncertainty in 2008-2009. As such, Dinesh devoted himself full time to conducting PMs and outreach to other deaf people living in Pune and elsewhere. He and Pinky began traveling all over India in search of new additions to his team. This traveling has been a great source of pride to them both and they speak frequently of their independence and ability to fly all over India and meet current and prospective downlines. Deaf people often enviously mention this when talking about Dinesh and Pinky because such travel is not the norm in deaf and normal worlds. They are a young and energetic couple in their early thirties and both grew up without using sign language to communicate-- as they often point out during their PMs and other presentations. Yet they have learned sign language and now they sign fluently as they say that they want to communicate the wonderful opportunities offered by Silver Venture to other deaf people; their choice to learn sign language serves to align them with the larger deaf world.

Dinesh and Pinky’s rags (really, they were middle class) to riches and voice to sign story is a source of great inspiration to many deaf people. I should note that the telling of such inspirational personal and community stories are both part of Silver Venture’s power and part of what may scholars consider to be part of the fabric of deaf sociality. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, as part of deaf sociality, deaf people introduce themselves by telling their personal, institutional, and communal biographies and share their past experiences and histories in relation to the deaf world; such stories serve as a means of sharing information and binding people together (Lane et al. 1996, 7). These stories also function as communal norms and through their telling and receiving they create opportunities both for deafs to orient themselves towards becoming a part of this community and to learn what is important within it (Bechter 2008). Dinesh and Pinky, and other Silver Ventures leaders and members, have transformed this technique of telling self-narratives to also include future oriented narratives in which hopes and dreams are shared. These future-oriented biographies-in-the-making therefore mark a departure in the normative telling of stores within deaf worlds, which are usually past-
oriented (Mindess 2006). These future oriented biographies, as well as the sharing of narratives about hopes and dreams, point to the work of imagination (and aspiration) as a social practice (Appadurai 1996).130

The Anthropologist’s First Prosperity Meeting

I first learned about, and then later met, Dinesh while I was living in Bangalore. On September 1, 2008, I had invited myself over to Aparna’s house as deafs in Bangalore had told me that Aparna was a Bangalore leader of Silver Venture. At that point, I had never seen a prosperity meeting (PM) nor did I know what one was. I also did not really understand what the business was. Therefore, when I heard that Aparna was doing a PM one afternoon at her house I begged her to let me attend and she graciously permitted me to do so. I was initially quite surprised that she had become involved in this business as she was employed in two successful jobs as an animator for a large company and as a fashion designer in her family’s business. Aparna is a tall and fashionable woman in her early thirties with excellent sign language and English communication skills (thanks to attending an innovative deaf private school which permitted sign language in her home city) and a vast deaf and hearing social network. She presents as extremely confident and is very outgoing with both deaf and normal friends. Her love marriage to a normal husband created waves in the deaf world in Bangalore.

Upon arriving at Aparna’s house, I discovered that the other attendees were two young women and a young man in their twenties all working at different coffee café chains, a friend of the young man who is studying for a bachelors degree in computer applications, and Naveen, the pastor from the True Bible Fellowship who said that he came just to “see and learn” and that he was “curious.” As I had see one of the young women and the pastor at church the previous week, we chatted for a few minutes and caught up on each others’ news. We also admired Aparna’s lovely flat; we were all impressed by how large and spacious it was. Indeed, the attendees seemed to be quite in awe of Aparna herself as she was of a different social and economic standing from them and had higher educational qualifications. After chatting informally for a while, we clustered around the coffee table in the sitting room for the prosperity meeting. Aparna started her presentation by asking us “Who does not want to help people?” and of course everyone responded that they wanted to help others. She then told us that the presentation was going to be like a parachute trip and that we should not interrupt or ask questions until we landed. And she said that we were required to turn off our mobile phones, which we all obediently did. At that point she turned on her laptop and began an elaborate power point presentation.

Aparna started by saying that we all had dreams when we were children and she asked us what our dreams were. The male coffee shop worker said that he wanted a house and a stable job and Aparna responded to this by stating that at the rate that we were going, it would take fifty years to make fifty lakhs. She then flashed on the computer screen various objects of desire: a big bungalow, a Ferrari car, a world tour, good education for children, and money for retirement. She told us that, like most of the world,

130 Future oriented narratives that revolve around the acquisition of material goods and consumption also point to the way that being a member of the middle class, or desiring to be such a member, is a social project within which people collectively participate (Liechty 2003, Fernandes 2000). Most Silver Venture members were either middle class or middle class aspirants.
we would never be able to afford these things. Then she showed us complicated charts with information about poverty rates and percentages as established by the United Nations. Aparna had to stop at this point as no one in the room knew what the United Nations was and so she explained that it was the United Nations which stopped India and Pakistan from fighting. She then showed a diagram of a river of money far away from a cluster of houses. Over a period of a year, one house laid pipes and was given access to this water and money, and then the other houses around it piped in water from that house—sharing resources being the message. Implied was that upon joining Silver Venture and being connected to other uplines and downlines, there would always be a steady stream of revenue running. This resonated with attendees as they were already connected and plugged into each other through being part of deaf sociality.

Returning to the theme of helping people, Aparna went on to discuss the Silver Venture foundation, which she said had donated money to NGOs around the world. She showed us a scrap book in which there were various certificates attesting to Silver Venture’s humanitarian work and pictures of famous members of Silver Venture performing charitable works. *Here is a business that helps people.* Aparna tied this back to our desires to help others and she said that through participating in the business we would be able to do this. Aparna ended her presentation by showing us video clips of dizzying crowds at Silver Venture international conferences and she told us stories about various people shown in the clips: the twenty six year old man who retired after making lakhs of rupees and the bored housewife who joined Silver Venture despite her husband’s resistance and subsequently wound up making more money than her husband.

After Aparna finished her presentation, we sat around drawing diagrams of uplines and downlines as we were all struggling to understand how the business worked. Aparna patiently explained the rules around duplication and the importance of recruiting someone for your left and right sides. She called this “the importance of balance.” She also explained the importance of duplicating the work of uplines and she stressed that “the power of duplication” was one of the main principles of the business. Then a conversation about logistics ensued in which Aparna told us that potential members had to possess personal account numbers (PANs) and she told us which government office we could get these from. And she instructed us that we needed credit cards in order to join. Once we had these credit cards, our names and numbers could quickly be entered into the computer system. We all gazed at her with glazed looks in our eyes. Before everyone left, Aparna distributed silver and white business cards on which she was identified as a “prosperity consultant” and as a member of Team Wonderful Dream. Both of the women present seemed excited about joining but they were concerned about their lack of money, credit cards, and PAN cards.

Later on, Aparna told me that she was not in favor of any of these attendees joining. She said that they lacked good English skills, were not computer literate, and their current earnings of five thousand rupees a month prevented them from being able to raise the required 30,000 rupees to join. According to Aparna, it is important to focus on quality and not quantity when recruiting people for the business. She explained that quality means someone who is easy to communicate with via text messaging and email, knows good English, can easily be trained to do a prosperity meeting and to recruit others to the business, and has disposable income. Aparna noted that there were few deaf people like this in Bangalore and elsewhere and so it was difficult to find good team members.
She also said, and this is something that I heard others say frequently when critiquing other teams, that there were people who just wanted to make fast money and so they were not choosy when picking people to become their downlines-- and this would later create problems.

While Aparna’s prosperity meeting was the first one that I saw, it would not be the last. A few days later I went to Kishore’s cyber café as Aparna told me that Kishore was one of her downlines and she was teaching him how to do prosperity meetings. Kishore showed me his presentation and it was identical to Aparna’s as she had given him a copy of her power point presentation. Kishore also told me that Bangalore based members of Team Wonderful Dream congregated in his cyber café on Sunday afternoons in order to discuss their dreams for the future, plan prosperity meetings, and discuss strategies for recruiting people. Kishore told me that he was initially reluctant to join but he decided to do so after thinking about it for two months. He told me: “My cyber café is not enough for the future. My earnings are not good enough. How will I live in the future?” Kishore’s words, “Future life how?”, reflected anxiety and uncertainty about how to plan for, and what life would be like, in the future.

On Hopes and Dreams

Kishore told me that his dream was to travel with other deaf people, a dream that I heard repeated again and again by others on his team and other teams. Chetan, another member of Team Wonderful Dream, told me that he decided to join after meeting Pinky and Dinesh and hearing about their journeys all over India. He thought that it would be wonderful to be able to travel with other deaf friends in large deaf groups but his government salary did not provide him with the financial means to do this. Aparna also said that she wanted to travel and she was also interested in wine tasting and horseback riding. Since the formation of the Pan Indian Deaf League in 1955, deaf Indians have traveled all over India for sporting events and competitions, deaf culture seminars, and beauty and dance pageants, often in large groups. Such traveling, even to a neighboring city or state, is an important part of being a member of a deaf organization. However the kind of tourism and traveling that the special friends desired departs from this form of institutional deaf travel as it is independent, purely recreational, and unfettered by deaf bureaucracies.

In addition to this aspiration for middle class personal mobility and independence, participants told me about their desire to help other deaf people. Dinesh told me multiple times that Silver Venture provides him with the freedom and time to help other deaf; he said that if he had a regular job, he would not be able to meet and help deaf people as frequently as he currently does (although he did not actually give me examples of how he helped people outside of encouraging them to participate in the business). He and Pinky regaled me with stories about how they had helped very poor deaf people as well as deaf people without good sign language or English skills. For instance, there were two very poor team members in Pune who they had personally encouraged to join Silver Venture. Prior to joining Silver Venture, neither had a pucca, or proper, roof over their head and because of their earnings they have been able to afford a new roof. According to Dinesh and Pinky, each has also earned over two lakh rupees through working hard. Similarly there is the Gujarati housewife who was timid and shy before she joined Silver Venture; now she has learned English and can confidently give PMs on her own.
Dinesh and Pinky also mentioned Margaret, an “average” and “low” person with poor communication skills who joined their team in Bangalore. Margaret exists on the fringes of the Bangalore deaf world due to her halting sign language and awkward ways. She had joined the business and was having problems recruiting people to join under her due to her inability to deliver a persuasive PM and her lack of an extensive deaf social network. Dinesh and Pinky said that her team members wanted to “help and support” her to succeed. Helping Margaret was an example of how Silver Venture supported deaf people in their everyday lives as presumably Margaret would learn better sign language skills in order to recruit more people. Through participation in Silver Venture, she would transform herself into a native signer and become more confident, just like Dinesh and Pinky.

Dinesh, and then Kishore as well, told me that they wanted to build old age homes for deaf senior citizens—this was one of their dreams. Similarly, Devananda, a deaf Krishna devotee, told me that he had joined Silver Venture in order to buy land to build an ashram, a home for aged deaf, and a meditation hall. Minoo, perhaps the oldest member of Team Wonderful Dream in Bangalore, told me that she joined under Devananda and that “he is using the business to support and help deaf” and she wants to do this as well. She said: “I want to help poor deaf people coming from villages, I want to help deaf people learn about HIV and AIDS, I want to help deaf go to America to study, and I want to help deaf in India get into colleges.” These Silver Venture members desired to use their earnings towards deaf development—creating better education options for the deaf as well as deaf run institutions such as schools, ashrams, and old age homes. Deaf development was a theme running through prosperity meetings and members often saw Silver Venture as a way of achieving deaf development. Or was this desire to help others merely a way to legitimize middle class aspirations in the face of collective deaf lack? I argue that participating in Silver Venture was permeated by tensions between desiring individual commodities and experiences and collective deaf development. The story of those who participate in Silver Venture is therefore similar to, but also departs from, Mark Liechty’s (2003) story of young Nepalis’ experience of being middle class, which he argues is very much about consumption and “commodity futures” (also see Fernandes 2000 on choice, consumption, and the discursive construction of the Indian middle class). My interlocutors wanted to be able to consume but they also wanted collective deaf development.

**Negotiating Sameness and Difference as Not All Deaf People are the Same**

On one hand I view the desire to help and support other people as a means of trying to establish authority and legitimacy vis-à-vis other deafs (it is socially better to be the one who helps others as opposed to being the one who is helped). I also view this desire as a way of legitimizing participation in a business that many feel ambivalent about at times. On the other hand this desire to help other deaf people seems to be motivated by the notion of “deaf deaf same,” or a shared deaf experience and orientation.

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131 As I will discuss further on in this chapter, Devananda is a particularly problematic figure for many deaf people. A former Hare Krishna and now independent guru, he teaches “moral science” at deaf schools in Bangalore while also recruiting people for multilevel marketing business schemes. He has excellent English and sign language skills and says he wants to help people; however, many people are suspicious of his intentions.
towards “helping and supporting” other deafs. This shared deaf experience translates into a sense of intimate responsibility towards other deafs simply because they are deaf. Yet, there were also tensions around ideas of sameness and difference and who should be a member of ones’ team (although everyone should be helped).\textsuperscript{132}

Indeed, as I discussed earlier, Aparna stressed the fact that members should choose their downlines carefully. Teams are ideally to be exclusive and controlled: the business is not for all deafs. For example, Chetan expressed much dismay after he learned that Margaret had been recruited to be a member of his team: “I cannot imagine the future of the business with people like Margaret in it…she is so low, she cannot think properly, she is perhaps a bit MR [mentally retarded].” And Aparna also expressed dismay about the fact that a downline in another city had convinced a woman with poor sign language and English communication skills to join. She said that this woman would never be able to recruit other people under her, so what was the point? Aparna felt rather bitter about this as it meant that she would have to do more work on behalf of her downlines because they would not be able to recruit people on their own. As noted above, the ideal team member was someone who could read and write well, with access to a computer, and with excellent sign language skills—someone who is trainable.\textsuperscript{133}

Yet, the constant focus on the importance of team and working together and the small pool of potential deaf members served to bring together on a weekly basis people who would not normally want or choose to work together. For example, Aparna told me that she did not like Devananda because he behaved inappropriately with women. Chetan said that Minoo was a thief and she borrowed money from people and did not repay it. He had avoided spending time with her in the past after having a bad experience selling Amway products with her and now they were on the same team. Arman, a member who I have not mentioned yet, became very angry when Devananda greeted people by saying “Hare Krishna” because he is Muslim and finds this greeting offensive; he told me many times that he did not like Devananda. At one point, Aparna—as Devananda’s downline and Arman’s upline—had to step in and mediate between the two of them. And so Team Wonderful Dream was very much a space created out of, and in relation to, past relationship histories that had to be negotiated in order to maintain team harmony. Team members engaged in what I have called sameness work through which they focused on shared experiences and desires and adjusted behavior and expectations.

Hierarchies and Relationships between Uplines and Downlines

Tensions over the very clear hierarchy in the Silver Venture structure as well as over conflicting understandings of “help and support” due to downlines were also visible. At one point Aparna bragged to me that she had fifty seven people below her. She was proud of being responsible for teaching and guiding so many people. She told me that she had learned from Dinesh the proper way to do a PM and that he had taught her everything she knew. She planned to teach her downlines the same things that Dinesh had taught her, as she did with Kishore by sharing her PM presentation. In doing so, she was imitating her upline and passing on the knowledge that she learned from him. As mentioned earlier, Dinesh and Pinky travel all over India to “support,” “motivate,” and conduct further

\textsuperscript{132} Thanks to Mara Green for the productive concept of intimate responsibility.
\textsuperscript{133} The ideal special friend is identical to the ideal BPO or DEO employee as discussed in Chapters Three and Four.
trainings with their downlines. On one occasion, I accompanied Dinesh, Pinky, and Aparna on a trip to a Erode, a medium-sized city in Tamil Nadu, where they went to do PMs and help their already existing downlines recruit additional members. Similarly, Rajesh from Team Commitment went to Kerala at least twice in the year that I was in Bangalore to recruit new downlines for his team and he occasionally lent funds to particularly well connected prospective downlines so that they could join (and therefore recruit others). Thus, uplines were invested in their downlines-- at least they claimed to be so.

Hierarchies were enforced and reinforced by uplines telling their downlines to imitate and follow them. Krishna, a Pune based member of Team Wonderful Dream told me that “members have to teach and explain exactly like those above teach and explain.” At the 2009 anniversary function, Vicky and Bhupen opened the program by running onto the stage and exuberantly stating: “Do you know me? Follow me! You can do it too! Follow me!” The obscured question remains, however, can a downline do exactly what an upline does? There are a finite number of deaf people and downlines, especially those currently at the bottom of the pyramid, have a more restricted pool of people from which to recruit. This vertical hierarchical structure of uplines and downlines exists in direct opposition to the Deaf Studies literature written on the collegial and collective nature of deaf culture and the deaf world which values horizontality and informality (Lane et al. 1996, Ladd 2003, Padden and Humphries 1999). Such hierarchies, as discussed throughout this dissertation, seem to permeate deaf socialities in this milieu. Who teaches who? Who supports and helps who? Who gives knowledge and who receives it? Who is an upline and who is a downline? As these questions are commonly asked and answered, they point to the existence of hierarchy as part of deaf common sense (Gramsci 1999, 199). A tenuous harmony is created through hierarchy.

However there was no harmony between competing teams. Aparna and Rajesh were bitter enemies despite the fact that Aparna and Rajesh’s wife Varuna were close school friends growing up. Rajesh was originally supposed to join the business under Aparna but after hearing another PM he changed his mind and joined Team Commitment. In choosing to join another team, Rajesh also turned his back on his old teacher and mentor, Devananda, who formerly counseled him on the importance of strict vegetarianism and maintaining proper morality. As a result of Rajesh’s decision to join another team, there were two competing teams in Bangalore in search of additional members to GRAB or “grab.”

Team meetings were shrouded in secrecy and I was treated with suspicion when people learned that I was interacting with both teams. Members of each team were afraid

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134 I would argue that this Deaf Studies literature ignores very real power and status differentials within deaf communities surrounding gender, race, educational background, signing ability, etc. There is, for example, a growing body of academic literature that critiques Deaf Studies’ refusal to address questions of gender differentials (e.g., Brueggemann and Burch 2006). Mara Green (2008b) analyzes the vertical structure of deaf organizations in Nepal and argues that such verticality should not be seen as being at odds with development, despite a widespread academic and activist focus on horizontality and equality.

135 Most deafs used the sign “to grab” when talking about recruiting people for the business. This is the same sign that people used when talking about recruiting for church. Once I used this sign when talking with Dinesh and he became upset and said that it was “not a nice sign.” He said that he preferred the sign “to partner.” However, I frequently saw him use the sign “to grab” and this tension over “grabbing” and “partnership” seems to me to be related to the tension between “to persuade” and “to force.”
that I was spying for the other team or that somehow word would circulate (which it often
does in a world that functions through circulations of “news,” information, and rumors).
Deaf people who were not members of either team were often aware of and frequently
discussed the rivalry between the two teams and how Aparna and Rajesh were enemies.
This tension and rivalry was a source of concern, and of interest, for people because
Bangalore’s deaf world is very small. On one hand, these competing teams created a
fissure in the deaf world of Bangalore and turned, in extreme cases, students against
teachers (as in the case of Rajesh not joining Devananda’s team). On the other hand,
through sameness work members of different teams were able to create friendly and
harmonious deaf spaces by not discussing the business when they met at other deaf
functions.

Failed Promises
Yet the animosity between competing teams extended to (and created) other
worlds as well: Arman was a very shy, overweight, and socially awkward twenty nine
year old who avoided hanging out with other deaf people because he said that they
always gossip and tell lies. Arman also learned sign language quite late as he initially
attended a normal school and did poorly there, resulting in his family transferring him to
a deaf school where he finally learned sign language. According to his very protective
mother, Arman was going through a “low” period in the spring of 2008 because he had
left his job as an assistant supervisor at an Adidas shop and had no friends. Both Kishore
and Rajesh were classmates at the deaf school that he had attended and while he was
initially closer to Rajesh, they grew apart and did not have much contact after school was
finished. One day, Kishore invited him to his cyber café for a meeting that Arman
thought was going to be about real estate but it turned out to be about Silver Venture.
Arman said that after watching Kishore’s PM, he was not interested and he thought that
Silver Venture was a “bad business.” But then Kishore brought Aparna to Arman’s house
to do another PM and while Arman said that he was still not interested, he said that
Aparna “kept on SMSing and calling my mom and calling and SMSing and finally I
agreed. She forced me.” He also said that Kishore, Chetan, and Aparna kept on telling
him via SMS that the business was “good.” So he joined under Aparna.

According to Arman’s mother, Aparna promised her that she “would take care of
Arman and train him. She also said that she would help him get a job at her company and
they became very close friends, so close that Arman would call Aparna his sister.”
Aparna promised Arman more than just inclusion in Silver Venture; she promised to
include him wider deaf social networks. However, as the competition between Aparna
and Rajesh started to intensify, Arman found himself in the middle as he was once close
to Rajesh yet his new loyalties were to Aparna. This situation was stressful for Arman.
According to Arman’s mother, both Aparna and Rajesh constantly asked Arman for
information about the other person. Then Aparna became angry at Arman for sharing
information about her with Rajesh. Aparna started playing a smaller and less visible role
within the training process for her downlines because of her tensions with Rajesh-- and so
Arman and his family felt like she had abandoned them. Things escalated when Arman
and his family felt increasingly betrayed and misled and decided to ask for their money
Now Arman is not friends with either Aparna or Rajesh anymore and both teams have shunned him.

The Role of Force and Pressure in Silver Venture

There are two elements of Arman’s story that I would like to focus on: the theme of “force” and the role that his mother played within his decision to join the business. “Force” and the ambivalent presence of family are recurring themes in many Silver Venture stories that I was told. As I noted, Arman said that Aparna “forced” him to join the business. He asked me if Aparna, Dinesh, or Pinky had “forced” me to join. When I asked him what force meant, he said: “to call, contact, SMS, contact again and again and again.” Similarly, another woman living in Erode who joined the business told me that she was “forced” to join by deaf man who is a community leader: she said that he repeatedly asked her to join, sent her multiple text messages, and then he finally went online and used his credit card to sign her up and then demanded that she pay him back. She did give him money because she said that she was “forced” to do so even though she was not particularly interested in the business. My understanding is that she agreed to pay him because he was a powerful person within the local deaf community and she did not want to have a conflict with him.

I also heard stories from other deaf members who said that they had been “pressured” to join by close deaf friends and acquaintances. These people were ambivalent about joining but they did so to please their friends. After joining, many of them professed remorse and said that they did not want to be associated with the business but they did not know how to extricate themselves. Margaret, the “low” woman mentioned earlier, said that she had asked Dinesh if she could quit. She told me that his response was: “No, that I must keep on trying to find other people to join under me.” She said that she was confused because “my parents told me that Silver Venture is bad and that I should quit, but Minoo and Dinesh tell me that it is good, what to do?”

In conversations with Dinesh, Pinky, Aparna, and Rajesh, they were all very clear that they did not want to force people to join and that it was up to people to make up their own minds: “If they like the business they can join, if they don’t like it, no problem.” But in many cases, heavy pressure was exerted after PMs and at social functions. I was often pressured as well. I was frequently asked what my dreams were and how I was planning to achieve them-- and I was seen as a potential international recruit living in America who would help them to greatly expand the business. I repeatedly found myself saying “no thank you” often with little success. Devananda told me that he thought there was a problem “because deaf people cannot tell the difference between pressure and force. One must persuade only, not force.” However, in social networks as insulated as deaf networks, persuasion and social pressure can often be felt as force (Becker 1980, 89-90). How to say no to ones’ schoolmates, colleagues, and close friends? As I discussed in previous chapters, deafs tend to depend on, and imitate, other deafs in their pursuit of

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136 This was the first and only instance in which I heard of a team member asking for a refund and it resulted in Arman being ostracized. It was likely that Aparna provided Arman with a refund from her own money in order to avoid the shame of a potential public dispute.

137 I continued to see Margaret throughout the year at different cultural and business functions and she always told me the same thing: that she was waiting for training and that she was confused. As far as I knew, she recruited one person, a former classmate, to join under her.
new paths. In this sense “deaf deaf same” functions in the same way that “sign butter” (as discussed in Chapter Five) does and it can result in easy translation from social to financial capital. As a result of “deaf deaf same,” deaf people are more willing to enter into new worlds which may initially have seemed immoral or uninteresting to them--because there are other deaf people present in these worlds.

The Ambivalent Presence of the (Normal) Family

Another recurring theme was the role of the family in stories about Silver Venture. Arman’s mother encouraged him to join even though she told me that a few years earlier, some family friends had tried to recruit her and she turned them down because she did not like the idea of network business for her. But, she said, “For Arman, it is a good opportunity.” She had hoped that it would “give him access to the mainstream deaf community and new friends as he is so depressed right now.” Arman’s mother had hoped that joining Silver Venture would increase Arman’s social capital in addition to his financial capital. In fact, as their family was quite well to do she was not too concerned about Arman making money; she was more concerned with injecting him into deaf networks. In her desire to help Arman, she told Aparna that Aparna could bring potential normal recruits to her and she would help Aparna do PMs. A recurring theme which came up during my research were families who thought that such businesses was not good for them but that they were good for their deaf child. And in many cases, deaf children would join against their families’ wishes and then eventually recruit initially reluctant family members to be their downlines, therefore bringing normal people into the business and setting up stable lineages.

Both Dinesh and Pinky’s entire families have joined the business. Dinesh’s father has embraced the business fervently and constantly travels to Qatar to make new connections. Deaf people under Dinesh often send normal people to Dinesh’s father for PMs and he convinced families of other deaf people to join under their children. Dinesh’s father said that he often told deaf people to recruit their families as this way there is more benefit for the entire family. Perhaps more importantly, normal family members can recruit other normal people into the business and therefore success will not only be dependent only on recruiting deaf people. Dinesh’s father and other normal speakers at the 2009 anniversary function stressed this point repeatedly. Yet not all families are in favor. Aparna convinced her mother in law to join although her husband is very much against the business as he thinks it is “dirty” and so she only does PMs at home (such as the one I saw) in his absence. And eventually, Team Wonderful Dream had to stop meeting at Kishore’s cyber café as Kishore’s father did not approve of the business. In general, Silver Venture leaders stress the importance of recruiting and enlisting family members. This represents an interesting tension between deaf participants’ desire to be independent and create new networks of deaf teams, lineages, travel groups, and old age homes, and their need and desire for their family’s approval. It is also interesting what

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Narratives of being “forced” or “pressured” to join Silver Venture are similar to narratives of being “pressured” to attend different churches although the stakes are different. There is no fee to attend church while joining Silver Venture is a substantial financial commitment.
kinds of businesses and associations (and moral and ethical compromises) families are willing to embrace in order to help their deaf children succeed.139

**International Linkages and the Business that Keeps on Giving**

And what is so appealing about this particular business? For one thing, it is international. All the deaf team leaders that I talked to said that they hoped to ultimately have deaf downlines based in the United Kingdom, United States, and Dubai in their desire to create international deaf financial networks. This would perhaps invert the currently existing power dynamic through which deaf foreigners come to visit India but not the other way around. The fact that Silver Venture is international was stressed by everyone who I talked to and gave it more legitimacy unlike other popular network businesses that only existed in India. Devananda told me more than once about a famous deaf badminton player that lives in the United Kingdom who is his downline. Rajesh forwarded all of his downlines a newspaper article about deaf members of the business in Hong Kong. And when a deaf man who immigrated to the United States returned to Bangalore for the summer, Rajesh tried diligently to recruit him by doing multiple PMs, inviting him to meetings, and introducing him to his Bangalore team.140 When I asked Rajesh if he joined other businesses, he said:

“[these other businesses] do not have teamwork and they are not good businesses for the deaf. Silver Venture adds value for the future and helps people to realize their dreams…it is a good business for people with dreams. The other businesses are finite as you get someone to join under you, then you eat and sleep, that’s all.”

There was something about the perceived expansive nature of Silver Venture-- it was full of possibility for deafs in its focus on entrepreneurialism, teamwork, and prosperity…and it was full of trafficking in dreams.

And what of these dreams? As I mentioned earlier in this dissertation, India in general and Bangalore in particular have gone through significant shifts as a result of liberalization and the emergence of a new IT culture and the possibilities surrounding it (Nair 2005, Frankel 2005, Upadhya and Vasavi 2006, 2008). For the most part deaf members of Silver Venture embodied many of the tensions and uncertainties surrounding economic liberalization, the decline and stagnation of federal and state industries and bureaucracies, and the precariously of the new IT and BPO sectors. Many of the Silver Venture members whom I met were government employees in either their late thirties or early forties. These deafs had been working in their positions for twenty years as clerks.

139 Compare Arman’s mother’s comments and actions in relation to encouraging her son to join Silver Venture with those of Rajat’s mother in relation to permitting her son to join a church from Chapter Five. What kinds of moral and ethical accommodations do parents engage in for their deaf children?

140 Chetan later told me that this deaf man living in the United States was so frustrated by all of the pressure from Rajesh to join Silver Venture that next year he would not return to Bangalore but would instead visit another Indian city instead. I doubt that he will be able find respite in another major Indian city as Silver Venture was found in all of the cities that I visited.
and while they had seen some increase in their pay over the years, they did not think that it was enough. They wanted additional opportunities, which they perceived Silver Venture to be offering them.

At one point during a visit to Pune, I sat at a bright and modern Café Coffee Day with three Pune based members of Team Commitment who stood out in their plaid shirts and pleated pants against the background of stylish youngsters chatting with friends. These men were all in their late thirties to early forties and had gone to work for government banks right after finishing class ten, at the age of seventeen; and so after twenty years of service, they were looking for something new. As they lacked marketable skills, Silver Venture was an an attractive possibility and it represented something dramatically different from their eight hour a day bank jobs with set coffee breaks and rigid protocol. They spoke excitedly about retiring soon and focusing full time on Silver Venture.

I heard similar things from other bank workers and clerks-- that the work has not changed, that salaries have not increased, and that their pay was not enough for their future. While these deafs at least had stable employment, there were other deafs who had found jobs in the IT and BPO sectors and they felt that their employment, while providing a decent salary for now, was not stable and so they wanted a safety net for the future. And then there were a few people like Kishore, with his cyber café, and Devananda, the unaffiliated guru, who did not currently have stable incomes. And there was the common lament about the failure of the state to provide livelihood to deaf people uttered most clearly by Kishore: “The government does not help deaf people.” Indeed, Pinky, like many members, sees Silver Venture as functioning as the provider that the state is not. As she said:

“...it is difficult for deaf in India to get jobs and deaf and hearing are not equal. Deaf people do not own cars and do not fly on planes. But deaf people have dreams as well and this is how Silver Venture helps deaf...we want to travel all over India to support deaf people.”

Unlike the state which has failed to meet deaf peoples’ needs, Silver Venture offers possibilities for deaf development. Through their efforts in Silver Venture, participants will be able to plan better deaf futures and build deaf old age homes.

**New Dreams, New Senses of Time and Space**

Pinky lectured me about deaf peoples’ dreams and the failure of the state to nourish them while we were sitting in a fancy air-conditioned conference room at a large multinational IT company in Bangalore. Devananda had contacted a deaf man who worked there and this employee reserved the conference room for a meeting. While sitting in a luxurious office chair and drinking “free” coffee and water, I kept on thinking about the fact that we were sitting in an IT conference room and about the relationship between Silver Venture and such corporate spaces. I argue that Silver Venture, similar to the multinational corporation where we were holding our meeting, is as much a product of Bangaloreans’ and Indians’ desire to participate in a modernity imagined and understood through global connections and consumption (Appadurai 1996, Liechty 2003).
Participation within Silver Venture is the flip side of becoming the employable deaf subject as I discussed in previous chapters. As I noted earlier, liberalization has resulted in the pulling back of the state and rescinding of welfare-oriented policies, rendering livelihood for people with disabilities even more precarious. Liberalization has also resulted in the introduction of new forms of capital circulation and value production. In the process, new arrangements and relations between people, the state, and things have emerged. Deafs come to expect less from the state and Silver Venture functions as a safety net: it is a source of livelihood, it offers deafs “help and support” through teamwork and the arrangement of deafs into teams and lineages, and it promotes new imaginaries of deaf development in the future which include deaf old age homes, group travel, and better deaf schools. Participating in Silver Venture is also a process of becoming in which deaf people become more confident, better signers, and more aware of what their aspirations and dreams are for the future.

The process of becoming through participating in Silver Venture represents a shift or a rupture from previous ways of being deaf in the world. In her 1995 article on Caritas, a pyramid scheme in Romania, Katherine Verdery writes:

“At the simplest level, by participating in it [Caritas] people began to think differently about money. It enabled them to manipulate in their minds sums which they had never imagined, to think about what they might do with such sums—to plan their expenditures—and to grow accustomed to thinking about larger and larger sums in a gradual way…It created in peoples’ imaginations a sphere in which money circulated and they themselves participated without really understanding its principles” (Verdery 1995, 643; emphasis in text).

Verdery points to the ways that planning for the future creates new ways of being in the world involving circulations of capital, hopes, and dreams. In addition to introducing new techniques such as planning and budgeting, Verdery suggests that Caritas introduced new ideas of time, specifically the linear flat time of capitalism which she states did not always mesh well with the cyclical and often convulsive time of socialism (ibid, 651). For those participating within it, Caritas became more than just a pyramid scheme in that it offered visions of imaginary new lives full of plenty, earthly paradises, and new moral rules (ibid). Verdery’s (1995) discussion of transformations in conceptions of time has resonance although I would also argue that with Silver Venture, there are also transformations made to the way that spaces are imagined, created, and ordered.

As I discussed at the very beginning of this chapter, in their dialogue about the Pune anniversary mela, Rajesh and Sharad pointed to the importance of paying attention and being disciplined during Silver Venture meetings and functions. Rajesh would often arrange the meeting rooms where his team met so that people were not sitting immediately next to each other and were out of each other’s eye view in order to institute disciplined paying attention. Dinesh and Pinky were adamant about the importance of being punctual and starting events on time and they made distinctions between Silver Venture deaf space and time and social deaf space and time by pointing out that Silver Venture was different than everyday deaf life and that was “about business not fun.” There was also the sense that one could join Silver Venture very quickly through entering credit card information onto a website; the fact that the business could be tracked on-line
was a source of marvel to people. The space and temporality of Silver Venture was therefore different than everyday deaf space and time.

However, despite these new conceptions of time and space, deafs spent a lot of time searching for new recruits and waiting for checks to come (if they came at all). Most meetings never started on time and were extremely disorganized. The meeting held at the multinational IT company’s conference room which I discussed above started almost two hours late much to Dinesh’s dismay. When I spent time traveling with Aparna, Dinesh, and Pinky in Tamil Nadu, plans were always chaotic and changing. I never knew what we would be doing next because the deafs who we were meeting and spending time with never had clear plans. And so actual practices often did not reflect peoples’ new conceptions of space and time. In many cases, deafs did not seem to have the necessarily skills, knowledge, or communication access for such planning. For example, deafs often did not understand the process of arranging for or canceling train tickets, booking hotel rooms, and they were unable to either communicate clearly via SMS to other deafs about the importance of a meeting and where it will be held or ensure that their messages were understood by deaf recipients.

Yet despite vague immediate plans, deaf members had clear imaginaries of the future. Like Caritas, Silver Venture has done similar work for its participants through its introduction of new future imaginaries. Pune has become a model of what a successful deaf future could be, although as Dinesh and Pinky are quick to point out, they have not attained most of their dreams yet and they have not “helped” as many people as they would like to help. Dinesh, Pinky, Vicky, Bhupen, and the other Pune leaders constantly entreated downlines and potential recruits to “Come to Pune and see for yourself.” What they meant was come and see our fancy houses and cars, come and see how well we dress, come and see the air-conditioned conference rooms in which we meet, and come and see how confidently we circulate amongst our neighbors and friends. Perhaps underlying all of this is a sense of come and see both how normal we are (look at our cars, air conditioners, and expensive clothing) and how deaf we are (look how well we sign and how much we care about other deaf people). This again points to the role of imagination as a social practice that creates a community (Appadurai 1996). And it also points again to the tensions between material desires and desires to help other deaf people.

No Banquet at the Second Anniversary Program

And many of us did go to Pune. As I noted earlier, perhaps one thousand special friends from all over India attended the 2008 anniversary function. However, the 2009 gathering had far fewer attendees and was not the envisioned international gathering of two thousand or more deaf attending. Instead, there were about 250 of us and we sat on plastic chairs in a dim hall. There was no lavish banquet as Sathi, Guide of Destiny, had promised there would be if there were over one thousand attendees and the mood was subdued. Why was there such a decline in numbers this year? One obvious reason was that India was in the midst of a recession, a source of much confusion and concern, and so many deaf were either afraid to join the business or lacked money. Another reason was the fact that despite exhortations by Dinesh, Pinky, and other leaders to have their downlines follow them and duplicate their success, downlines were unable to convince other deaf to join for a variety of reasons: they could not explain the business clearly.
enough as a result of their sign language skills or not understanding the principles of the business themselves, they expected their uplines to do the presentations for them, and Silver Venture started developing a “bad” reputation over time. Deafs constantly mentioned that the Silver Venture office in Ahmedabad had been shut down by the police and gold coins had been seized by the government, that the coins were not real gold, and that there was a lot of “force” placed on deaf people to join the business. Downlines lamented the lack of training that they were receiving from uplines and there was much fighting within teams over who would “grab” potential deaf recruits. And, of course, there was fighting between teams.

In addition, while many members of Rajesh’s Team Commitment attended, neither Aparna nor anyone else from the Bangalore Team Wonderful Dream came to the 2009 program. Aparna was taking a break from the business as a result of her conflict with Arman and she told me that she was sick of everyone fighting with each other. As Kishore’s father stopped their weekly meetings at the cyber café, the team had no place to meet and so trainings and recruitments had stopped. Chetan, who initially joined in order to travel with deaf friends, had become increasingly disillusioned and told me recently that he thought that the business was “dirty and that it is like gambling. It is a dirty business. Maybe Dinesh can do it as he comes from a business family but I am just a government servant.” Chetan’s point about the business being “dirty” was repeated by many deaf people in Bangalore as they became increasingly aware of the pitfalls of network marketing businesses which were proliferating in Bangalore. At the end of the anniversary function I felt quite melancholy because, despite the leaders’ tenacious efforts and travels all over India, the poor attendance seemed to represent the end of a potential deaf future, the loss of hopes and dreams about financial independence, starting schools for the deaf, and deaf old age homes.

This is not to say that there were not people who were still excited and optimistic. I talked to one young deaf man from Mumbai whose deaf father joined the business under Dinesh over a year ago but he has still not received training. When I asked this young man if he thought that it meant that his father’s opportunity was now ruined, he said that he did not think so. He said: “Silver Venture is like a beautiful new car. Even if you do not know how to drive it and take an auto [rickshaw] everyday, you will wash it everyday and you will one day learn how to drive it.” Similarly, Rajesh is still very committed to the business and he orders his Bangalore team to meet weekly although his downlines themselves have not recruited anyone themselves over the past five months and Rajesh does all the work. At the last Team Commitment meeting that I attended, Rajesh announced that he had recruited the treasurer of the Kerala Deaf Association and that this person had many contacts. And so perhaps there are still untapped markets, more social capital to transform into financial capital. And as Dinesh’s father said at the anniversary function: “Business goes up and down. You need to wait and be patient.”

This was yet another space for deaf people within which to work on cultivating patience.

Other Pyramid Schemes

In addition to Silver Venture, there were at least five other pyramid schemes operating in Bangalore and it was not uncommon for people to belong to Silver Venture and other schemes (although Dinesh repeatedly admonished people against doing this and told them that they had to devote their free time fully to Silver Venture). Aparna had
joined another scheme called Dream Days because she said that she did not need to do any work for this business. All she had to do was make one payment and then she would receive three checks. Many of the Bangalore based Silver Venture members were also members of Dream Days. I first found out about Dream Days at a yearly celebration held for Lord Krishna’s birthday that Devananda organizes. This program features sign language stories about Krishna, religious trivia, and an art contest in which students create and display pictures of Krishna.

At the end of the program, Devananda invited a normal woman to come up to the stage to explain about Dream Days. As there was no interpreter present, this woman wrote on the whiteboard and Devananda and Kishore, who was also present, informed the audience that Dream Days was a good business which is “one way like a train” as opposed to having duplication on both sides (unlike Silver Venture). They also said that because the business was “straight like a train,” there would be “no politics and grabbing.” I was very confused about what this business had to do with celebrating Krishna’s birthday and so I asked Chetan, who was sitting near me. We went outside and he explained that many deaf people are poor and do not have good incomes and that this is a way for them to become financially independent; he said that Devananda was trying to help poor deaf people.

No one else seemed fazed about marketing and recruitment during Krishna’s birthday celebration and people filled out paperwork and signed up. In the days, weeks, and months after the program, over 300 deaf people in Bangalore signed up, raising concerns about how Dream Days would be able to continue paying people in the future if so many people signed up immediately. A year later, Dream Days folded and Devananda sent me a link to an article from a Mumbai paper about the arrest of the founder of Dream Days who, according to the article, defrauded 52,000 people (Sathe 2009). Many deaf people lost their money in this scheme and people were extremely angry with Devananda who occupies a complicated role as both a spiritual and network marketing leader.

At another network marketing business meeting that I went to one Sunday afternoon after church, angry downlines yelled at and came close to physically assaulting Himanshu, the leader of another business called JGM. Himanshu was the president of the deaf association in a neighboring city and he had promised that he would “take care” of deaf people by adding them first and then padding the downline stream with normal people who would then carry the business forward. He said that his goal was to help the poor and that he hoped to set up a fund for poor deaf and disabled people. However, this did not happen either because he could not find normal people who were willing to join or because he did not do a good job of recruiting. Many deaf lost their money and this meeting was an opportunity for them to express their displeasure and frustration. In response, Himanshu pleaded with them for patience and “the importance of deaf unity, of cooperation, of helping other people.” He then unveiled yet another scheme which he

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141 In an interview with Aruna, a young woman and her mother, Aruna’s mother denounced Devananda as a hypocrite. He had taught Aruna about Krishna and moral science at the deaf school when she was growing up and she respected him as a teacher. One day he sent Aruna a text message and told her that he knew of a job opportunity for her and she went to meet him. He had in fact taken her to a network business office and was trying to recruit her for the business. Aruna spent a few hours in the office filling out paperwork, which she did not understand. When she took the paperwork home to show her mother, her mother explained to her what it was. Both mother and daughter were furious when they realized what the paperwork was for.
promised would yield positive results. Next to him on the stage was the president of the Bangalore Deaf Association, therefore lending legitimacy to Himanshu’s endeavors.

These are just two examples of how such businesses were entangled within multiple deaf spaces which all share the common themes of deaf development and aspirations for a better future for deaf people. I encountered such businesses at vocational training centers during lunchtime when friends not enrolled in training courses came to visit and talk about the latest business that they had signed up for, in IT offices where new employees awaiting training asked me what I thought about these businesses and if they should join, and after church was over for the day and attendees were milling about and sharing news. Talk of these businesses was, and is, permeated by anxieties of what it means to be good, what it means to develop, and how to plan for the future.

Recruitment sessions for these businesses are mostly held in large halls in colleges and corporations, spaces that are inaccessible to deaf people on other days. Slim paper invitations in envelopes are distributed at one recruitment session for yet another one and SMSes are circulated to invite deaf to come to meetings and learn more about different businesses. These invitations often mentioned transnational links, prosperity, and questions such as: “deaf’s future how?” or “future life how?” In some cases, deaf are confused about what the function is actually for although they often do not care. At one program, held in the auditorium of a dental college, attendees thought that they would be learning about the KMB network business because the deaf leader of KMB had organized the program. However, the program was actually set up to sell life insurance to the deaf. As we were soon to find out, KMB had folded under and Manojan, the deaf leader, had gone to work for an insurance company.

These programs tend to attract over one hundred people and most of the people in the audience do not necessarily care what the program is selling or promoting. Rather, they come to “see and learn” (a common refrain that I heard over and over again), to see their friends, watch the entertaining videos shown, to drink complimentary tea and eat free samosas, and to get invitations for the next event. These spaces are multi-generational and attract old, middle aged, and young deaf alike from all walks of deaf life. Programs are held mostly on Sundays and have replaced the “deaf club” as a locus of deaf gathering and sociality. Indeed when I compared the twice monthly gatherings of the BDA (held in a dismal hall above the Technical Association for the Deaf which attracts mostly older men) to these programs, the latter were much more heavily attended and more energetic.

At the last event that I attended, held in a huge auditorium of a womens’ college, I sat in between an unemployed beautician, a married couple working in government manufacturing jobs, and a clerk at a government aeronautics factory. All were there because they said that they were bored at home and they wanted to “see and learn.” I also spotted a group of young men who I had seen at almost every other presentation. I talked to one young man about the program and I asked him if he was confused about all of these different businesses. He said that he was not but that “Everything is always changing and leaders are moving between businesses. There is always a new business.” These business programs provide deaf with social and moral spaces for both meeting each other and for considering what is “right” or “wrong,” “good” or “bad.”

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142 The questions are written in this way on the invitations.
While deaf say that they come to “see and learn” and in doing so they express a remarkable openness to “see and learn” to anything as long as it is accessible, they also come to judge these programs. Through observing power point presentations announcing that everyone has dreams, that it is important to save for the future, and that team work is good, they are producing and participating in both material and affective space for considering what this future might be. They are learning language for talking about the future and techniques for articulating new forms of future oriented self-narratives. And for young attendees, mostly unemployed college students or students in vocational training programs, these programs provide opportunities for observing and meeting older deaf people, planning for future life, and living in the moment and hearing news.

Conclusion

Let me be clear that I am not making claims about there being anything “new” about Silver Venture compared to other schemes in other places. I argue that what is different about this story is that it is the story of special friends who, because of the particular resonance of this (structure of) opportunity with their already existing and coming-to-exist social forms, are in the process of creating new moral worlds. These new moral worlds are animated by tensions between desiring consumer goods and helping other deafs as well as offering “help and support” while at the same time encouraging independence. The category of special friends articulated with already existing structures of hierarchy, telling stories and self-narratives, possessing strong networks of social capital, and wanting to help other deaf people. Special friends teams and networks are further cemented through engaging in the production of future oriented self-narratives and circulation of hopes and aspirations for the future. These shared dreams and desires function as a form of sameness work through which participants orient themselves towards desiring the same goals and futures. And so this is a story of emerging deaf social forms as much as it is a story of economic change and uncertainty.
Chapter Seven: New Seeds/Follow Who?

Emerging Deaf Worlds

In previous chapters of this dissertation I focused on the creation of unintended deaf space as deaf young adults attend vocational training centers, seek employment opportunities, attend churches, and participate in pyramid schemes. In these chapters I analyzed what it meant for deaf young adults to aspire for deaf development as a moral project in different spaces. I examined the processes and practices by which deaf young adults become oriented towards each other and produce deaf sociality. In doing so, I examined the complicated dynamics and tensions between waiting and patience and adjusting and sameness work. These chapters mostly focused on deaf experiences in Bangalore although my interlocutors were often from other cities and non-urban areas as well. In addition, while I situated this work in Bangalore, it is important to note that Bangalore is not geographically bounded and deaf people from elsewhere in India and other countries often visited, passed through, or dwelled for a while in the city-- and so the city’s deaf population was dynamic.

In this chapter and in Chapter Eight, I shift focus both geographically and analytically and look at what I call two emerging deaf worlds which are forming in New Delhi. The first is created by the overlapping and interrelated National Indian Deaf Association, the Deaf Empowerment Training Center, and the Deaf Brothers and Sisters Club. This world exists at the intersection of deaf rights discourse and evangelical Christianity and uses both prayer and contentious politics as a tactic to attain deaf development. The second world exists at the nexuses between the National Institute of Hearing Handicapped in Bombay, the United Foundation which started in Bombay, the University of the Highlands in the United Kingdom, and the Indira Gandhi National Open University in Delhi. This world is concerned with creating deaf focused pedagogy and educational structures in which deaf people act as teachers. In this world, teaching, learning, and sharing are used as tactics to attain deaf development.

I argue that these worlds are both everyday and political worlds. At stake is a desire to reshape and remake the political, economic, and social landscape that deaf people live in. Leaders and participants within these worlds hope to challenge the status quo of perceived deaf under-development although they use different, and occasionally seemingly incompatible, tactics. Both desire state recognition of sign language and deaf peoples’ rights. And while these worlds are situated in Delhi, India’s capital and the seat of the national government, they are not bounded; emissaries from these worlds hold meetings and workshops throughout India.

As I will show, these two emerging worlds exist contingently and relationally with each other in that they offer competing and occasionally complimentary visions of how to be deaf in India and how to conceive of deaf development. Inspired by Mei Zhan’s (2009) concept of “worlding,” I argue that these worlds are “emergent socialities entangled in dynamic imaginaries of pasts, futures, and presents” and that they are constantly being made and remade (Zhan 2009, 6). The two worlds that I analyze in these two chapters are very much emergent and there is much at stake as deaf young adults come together in new deaf political, economic, educational, social, and pastoral structures in order to experiment with and create deaf presents and futures.
Anxiety

One of the reasons why I decided to conduct my field work mostly in Bangalore, as opposed to New Delhi, where I originally traveled to for my preliminary research, was the extremely contested and tense political climate which surrounded deaf social, political, and service organizations. It seemed impossible for me to carve out a neutral space for myself and I knew that I, just like the deaf young adults living in Delhi, would be seen as aligning myself with one organization or another, and in doing so, I would be considered SAVE or “saved” by some and SPOIL or “spoiled” by others. Everyone was either “saved” or “spoiled;” such was the moral landscape of the Delhi deaf world. This landscape was so polarized that one’s positioning within various nexuses of organizations meant that one would be considered either “saved” or “spoiled,” depending on who was judging or evaluating. Whenever I spent time in Delhi, I felt both anxious and exhilarated-- it was clear that there was a lot at stake in this landscape, that there was much to learn, and that Delhi was a very different world from Bangalore.

While deafs in Bangalore often spoke about DELHI POWER or “Delhi power” to refer to the fact that Delhi was the geographic location where deaf political power was concentrated and where deaf political organizations were based, it was more than just political power that was at stake. Delhi was a place where new kinds of deaf lives were created and contested. As I will discuss throughout this chapter and the next, political power articulated with other forms of power-- social, pastoral, and economic-- to create new deaf subjectivities as well as new ways of understanding (and reproducing) authority. The logics and patterns of deaf sociality articulated with these multiple forms of power to create new deaf worlds. Throughout my time spent in India, I learned that there were certain seeds that grew, and moreover that bloomed, in Delhi which refused to grow or even take root in Bangalore.

Robin, the person who told me about these seeds which refused to grow in Bangalore was a leader within an emerging deaf world that was, and still is, being created with Delhi (“Delhi power”, as most of my interlocutors called it) as its center. This world is made up of three seemingly different yet overlapping and interconnected organizations with three approaches to the same end of creating new deaf subjectivities. These three organizations, in order of oldest to newest, are the Delhi Deaf Brothers and Sisters Club (DDBSC or the clubs/church) which began in 1988, the Deaf Empowerment Training Center (DETC or training center) which was started in 1996, and the National India Deaf Association (NIDA) which was established in 2005. Each organization serves a different function: the DDBSC is a church and social club which meets on Sundays for the purposes of learning about the Word, sharing deaf news, and general socialization; the DETC is a vocational training center which provides deaf youth with vocational and personal development training and job placement services; and the NIDA is a newly formed member based political organization which aims to advocate for the rights of deaf people living in India through engaging in contentious politics.

While this nexus of organizations was originally formed in Delhi under the auspices of an international Christian organization, the “International Fellowship,” clubs

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143 I have changed the names of these three organizations despite the fact that one of them is a political and public one based on the requests of the man who has been given the pseudonym Vikas Chandrashekhar. He told me that he was concerned about public representations of the ways that the organizations are intertwined.
and training centers have been replicated in at least six other states in India. To date there are thirty three clubs and six training centers. The NIDA is also national in scale and conducts trainings, workshops, and meetings all over India: “Delhi power” is spreading. In this chapter I explore the articulations of these three organizations in order to understand what kind of deaf world they are creating. As these organizations do not exist in a vacuum, and are produced in relation to the larger deaf world of Delhi and India at large, I analyze the relationship between these organizations and the logics and patterns of deaf sociality at large. Also at stake is the relationship between religion and politics in creating new social movements around deafness, deaf rights, and deaf empowerment—terms that these organizations explicitly introduce into deaf discourse and which are quite new for deaf people in India. As deaf development and Christian development are entangled here, following Erica Bornstein (2005), I argue that “[c]ategories of good and evil, religion and politics, the individual and the social are locked in an embrace…” (Bornstein 2005, 172). This chapter is therefore an attempt to understand the character and comportment of the seeds that have been growing in Delhi, seeds that many argue are non-native to India and will “spoil” deaf Indians.

This chapter is thus fundamentally about power and authority and the divide between old and new ways of showing “Delhi power” and envisioning deaf development. While Karen Nakamura (2006) engages in a similar project in her work exploring the emergence of an activist and identity focused deaf movement in Japan and its relationship with a more assimilation based older organization, I argue that the particular conflict in Delhi between old and new is further troubled due to the articulation of rights language and Christian evangelical organizing; this articulation creates subjectivities and forms of authority which are seen to be distasteful and immoral to the older generation of deaf leaders and activists. In addition, while Nakamura argues that the success of the new youth movement in Japan is due to its ability to borrow and cultivate “American” discourse around deafness as a cultural identity, I do not locate/situate such discourse in America or the “west” but rather look at it as being produced through the interaction of multiple rationalities and logics in the moment (Nakamura 2006, 159). Building on Lisa Rofel’s (2007) work on how global discourses around gayness are practiced in everyday life in urban China, I argue that while these discourses may or may not be “from other places,” what is at stake is how they are produced and articulated by deaf young adults in Delhi.

Old “Delhi Power”

Before continuing, I provide some background on the history of deaf organizations in New Delhi. In 1955, the Pan Indian Deaf League (PIDL) was founded in Delhi as a confederation of deaf organizations across India. Prior to this time, there were only four deaf organizations across India—Delhi, Orissa, Calcutta, and Mumbai. In 1957, the PIDL formally affiliated with the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) which provides the PIDL with technical support, admission to conferences where Indian delegates from the PIDL can network with delegates from other countries, and credibility in that it has this international connection. The PIDL formally affiliated with the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) which provides the PIDL with technical support, admission to conferences where Indian delegates from the PIDL can network with delegates from other countries, and credibility in that it has this international connection. While the WFD does not provide the PIDL

144 The WFD was established in Rome, Italy in 1951 and it is an international non-governmental central organization of national associations of deaf people from one hundred and thirty countries. The WFD has consultative status in the United Nations (UN) system, including the Economic and Social Council.
with any funding, the legitimacy that it provides through affiliation has long been a source of pride to the PIDL’s governing body. The PIDL’s general secretary, Dharmesh, constantly refers to this affiliation and his international travels as a result of it. While there is still a Delhi Association of the Deaf, and while it was vital and active in the 1950s-1960s, most of its members are currently older and inactive. The offices of the PIDL and the adjacent offices of the All India Sports Council, have replaced the Delhi Association of the Deaf as social and political spaces.

According to Madan Vasishta (2006), the decline of the Delhi Association of the Deaf coincided with the emergence of the PIDL as leaders of the Delhi Association of the Deaf were dazzled by the possibilities that international affiliation offered and so switched their focus from Delhi to all of India and the deaf world at large. According to Vasishta, the political field of deaf organizations was always extremely contested and fractured. As he writes, comparing deaf organizations to Indian political parties: “Obviously deaf people were just like hearing people…Personal agendas are always bigger than a party’s agenda.” (ibid, 109). However, I would argue that because deaf social and political networks are smaller and more dense than hearing ones, personal politics are therefore more intense. The PIDL has become Delhi’s de-facto deaf organization and it has set up other organizations and training centers in Delhi: it initially established vocational training courses in photography and printing in the 1960’s. In the 1970’s, it built the Deaf Vocational Skills Center, a spacious training institute in south Delhi where training in welding, photography, tailoring, and more recently, computers is provided along with hostel facilities for deaf students from other states. In 1973, the Delhi Deaf Women’s League was founded with PIDL support to provide deaf women with training courses, a safe space for discussing womens’ issues (away from the male-dominated PIDL), and a crafts workshop. The 1970’s were the golden age of the PIDL and older deafs nostalgically remember the founding of the Deaf Vocational Skills Center when the president of India at the time, Shri V.V. Giri, laid down the foundation stone. At that time, the center seemed to be a bright harbinger of the future. I was told by older deaf men that V.V. Giri and Indira Gandhi, the prime minister at the time, both “loved deaf people” and that in those days, between the 1960’s and 1980’s, government jobs were plentiful.

Currently, the PIDL is headed by Dharmesh, an imposing and distinguished tall man in his sixties who previously worked as a draftsman for Tata Steel in Jharkland for twenty four years. He had been involved with deaf sports organizations and deaf social clubs in Jharkland and through these activities, he became involved in the PIDL; his trajectory served to embed him within the mainstream deaf social and political structure that existed at the time in India. When the general secretary’s position was available in the late 1990’s, Dharmesh decided to run for it even though it would present a significant pay cut for him. After winning the election, he relocated his family to Delhi where they

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(ECOSOC); the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the International Labour Organization (ILO); and the World Health Organization (WHO). The WFD also works with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and has representatives on the Panel of Experts on the UN Standard Rules for the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. WFD is a member of the International Disability Alliance (IDA). (WFD website http://www.wfdeaf.org/about.html).

145 It should be noted that the president of the PIDL is actually a hearing woman, a social worker from an affluent and influential family who “loves deafs” yet signs poorly and who does not spend much time anymore on PIDL related activities due to her increasing age.
live on the premises of the Deaf Vocational Skills Center. I have met Dharmesh many times over the years at deaf events in Delhi and in February of 2009, I conducted a more formal interview with him in his office at the PIDL office in central Delhi, not too far from the chaos of the Delhi Central Railway Station and the uneasy order of Connaught Place.

Our interview was conducted while other older deaf men sat around, alternating between watching us and chatting. Dharmesh was an authoritative figure with his silver hair, tall height, and the plaid blazer that he was wearing with a pin on each lapel. One pin was from the Deaf Olympics held in Melbourne, Australia in 2007 and the other was a Nepali flag as he had attended the WFD’s Asia-Pacific Regional Conference held in Pokhara, Nepal in December 2008. In wearing these pins, he proudly showcased his international status and his connections with other deaf organizations. As when I had previously met him in the summer of 2007, shortly after he returned from the WFD’s international congress which had been held in Spain, he told me about his experiences meeting delegates from other countries and showed me material artifacts-- flags, posters, brochures, and business cards-- that he had picked up during these meetings-- as further evidence of his ability to network broadly. These artifacts were evidence of his international connections: a glossy brochure from a deaf association in Finland was imbued with internationalist authority. For Dharmesh and other PIDL supporters, “Delhi power” derived from “WFD power.”

“Delhi power” also derived from convivial relationships with the state rehabilitation apparatus. When Dharmesh talked about his connections, he used acronyms, vestiges of Indian bureaucracy, at a dizzying pace: he talked about his influence at RCI (the Rehabilitation Council of India), NIHH (National Institute of Hearing Handicapped), and with the CCPD (Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disability). He also mentioned the many times that he met government ministers-- and there were photos on the walls of the PIDL office of Dharmesh and other PIDL members standing awkwardly next to government officials. Dharmesh’s discussion of his contacts, and his sphere of influence, points to the value that he places on the government disability apparatus, specifically with the two bodies which have been formed to implement the 1995 Persons with Disabilities Act-- the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (who monitors implementation of the Act and evaluates complaints) and the Rehabilitation Council of India (which is responsible for establishing special education institutes, monitoring teacher training, and overseeing special schools). Dharmesh also mentioned the National Institute of Hearing Handicapped which was established by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in 1983 in Mumbai and then subsequently in three other states in 1984 and 1986 (including New Delhi in 1986) to provide training for teachers working with the deaf, speech and hearing services, and more recently a sign language development department which offers sign language and sign language interpreting courses.

Dharmesh told me that the PIDL had the attention of all of these bureaucracies and that the government was open to him. He had faith in state efforts on behalf of deaf.

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146 As I discussed in Chapter Four. the 1995 PWD Act does not apply to the private sector. While the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities functions as a judge in disability employment discrimination cases, his authority only applies to the public sector. Thus, the powers of both the Act and the commissioner are quite limited.
people and he told me again and again that in the future, things will be better and that deafs need to be patient; “In America you have had three hundred years. In India we have had sixty years. In one hundred years, we will also have what you have.” In talking to me, Dharmesh stressed the value of patience and of working closely with the state and he expressed confidence in the state’s ability to provide deafs with brighter futures following on the path already set by the “west.” For Dharmesh, engaging in contentious politics was not the answer and he eschewed “fighting” for “patience” and “working together” with the state.

While Dharmesh stresses the importance of “working together,” it is not clear to most young deafs who I interacted with that his relationships with the state rehabilitation apparatus have resulted, or will result in, any improvement in the lives of deaf people. This is why I have chosen to use convivial to characterize this relationship. In do so, I am drawing on the work of Achille Mbembe (1992) who states that conviviality “is not necessarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration” and it is characterized by “familiarity and domesticity” (ibid, 4). Convivial relationships do not produce results for anyone other than the state; in this case, such relationships maintain the status quo. For the PIDL, conviviality seems to be enough for now. It is enough to be “known” to the state, it is enough to be welcomed into offices, and it is enough to have photos of PIDL leadership with government ministers. One simply needs to be patient. For the PIDL, deaf development means convivial relationships with the state, affiliation with the WFD, and a future in which deafs, through access to sign language interpreters, better educational opportunities in sign language, and employment, will be equal to normals.

And on patience: patience has long been a virtue in India due to its past valorization by Mahatma Gandhi. It is also currently, as a (virtuous) concept, utilized by social scientists such as Arjun Appadurai (2001) who writes about the “politics of patience” practiced by an alliance of non-governmental activist organizations through “a politics of accommodation, negotiation, and long-term pressure rather than of confrontation or threats of political reprisal” (ibid, 29). Appadurai writes about the ways that activists favor “cumulative victories and long-term asset building” in the face of obstacles (ibid). Members of the alliance, which Appadurai describes, have a long-term vision of democracy from below and they are willing to make sacrifices to achieve this vision. However, I contend that the politics of patience as practiced by the PIDL are more a politics of conviviality under which the long term goal is to continue to work with the state and not to subvert existing power structures. PIDL leaders believe that by being patient, conditions will change and deaf people will ultimately have the same opportunities that deaf people in the west have. When Dharmesh and other PIDL leaders speak of being “patient”, they mean a practice of engaging in convivial relationships combined with waiting for something to happen (and this is not dissimilar to the practice of patience by the vocational training students and BPO training graduates which I discussed in Chapters Three and Four. What is different, however, is that the PIDL is ostensibly a political organization with power).

The PIDL model of pursuing deaf development has been losing favor with young adults, most of whom do not have government jobs and who did not experience the

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147 Mbembe goes much further in talking about the ways that conviviality produces a spectacle and the ultimate zombification of both the ruler and the ruled in the African postcolony. I am not making this argument about the Indian state but rather drawing inspiration.
PIDL’s golden age. Indeed, I observed that the PIDL and its affiliated organizations were less and less relevant for younger deaf adults who rarely visited PIDL offices or attended its social functions which mostly occurred to celebrate patriotic festivals such as “Flag Day” or Hindu festivals such as Ganesh puja, a festival in honor of Ganesh. PIDL loyalists tended to be older men with government jobs and while the PIDL-run Deaf Vocational Skills Center was still in existence, its student numbers have been declining and there were only around forty students in 2008 compared to 188 students in the early 2000’s (according to an PIDL report of activities). The Delhi Deaf Women’s League was also becoming increasingly less popular as young women opted for co-ed computer training programs.

While deaf young adults did not reject the goals that Dharmesh had (to imitate western models of progress and thereby provide for better educational and employment opportunities for the deaf), it seemed that they were becoming increasingly disenchanted with his approach and desired something else. While they wanted sign language interpreters, better deaf schools, and job opportunities, they wanted them now; they were not willing to wait for the indefinite future. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, deaf young adults wanted to participate in social and cultural events which were temporally relevant and which nurtured a sense of self and sociality-- things that the older members of PIDL could not provide as they were out of touch with the needs and desires of youth. As such, they flocked to the National Indian Deaf Association, NIDA, a new organization that was established in 2005.

*New “Delhi Power”*

Here I include a hand drawn picture that was included in the first publication, a five page newsletter, that NIDA distributed in 2005 which explained the background and rationale for the establishment of NIDA: This drawing was created by a deaf British missionary who established rural community based rehabilitation programs for deaf children and adults in south India.
Let us return to the seed metaphor that I used in the beginning of this chapter as the artist who made this drawing also invokes it. NIDA is both the greenhouse and the seed in this diagram. It is represented in two ways. In one representation it can be seen as a rare and precious seed that needs much care and nourishment from committed deaf people in order to grow. What is required? Time and patience, hard work, and care. Growing NIDA is therefore an ethical project that requires NIDA supporters to develop an orientation towards growing NIDA. The NIDA supporter is invited to engage in the difficult task of
nurturing something that is alien to India, to take risks, and to hope for something different than the status quo. The NIDA supporter is also called upon to be invested and to take ownership: it is “our” NIDA, “our” clubs, and “our” training center-- “our” is a pronoun I heard again and again by deafs expressing ownership of this world.

In the second representation, NIDA is the greenhouse nourishing the deaf young adult, represented as the flower. The flower cannot grow without the greenhouse. Similarly, the deaf person cannot flourish without the nourishment of NIDA. The two, NIDA and the deaf supporter of NIDA, are interdependent and involved in both creating NIDA and a deaf subjectivity that is oriented towards deaf development. In this sense, deaf development means something more than what it does for the PIDL: it is about nurturing the deaf person (as a deaf person) as well as nurturing a deaf organization. Deaf development is deaf activism oriented towards creating opportunities for deafs, an awareness of deaf rights within the broader society, as well as an ethical deaf subject who is willing to work to cultivate deaf organizations.

NIDA was started in 2005 by members of the Delhi Deaf Brothers and Sisters Club (DDBSC), many of whom were also involved in the creation and running of Deaf Empowerment Training Center (DETC). Both organizations are under the umbrella of an international Christian group called the International Fellowship and are run by a hearing man named Vikas Chandrashekhar. Vikas, who goes by the name sign Smile, is a normal with a deaf daughter who has been a member of the International Fellowship for the past eighteen years. A former hippie from a Brahmin family in Hyderabad, Vikas/Smile was attracted to the International Fellowship’s communal, cosmopolitan, and unconventional lifestyle and its focus on service. He began pursuing a path of Jesus Bhakti, married a French woman who he met through the International Fellowship, and devoted his life to living closely with Jesus. Vikas/Smile defines Jesus Bhakti as a love of Jesus that is not incompatible with Hinduism. He says that he wants deaf people to “open their hearts to Jesus.” This approach is not a new one and as Sebastian Kim (2003) shows, it has missionaries have increasingly adopted it in the face of rising anti-missionary sentiment.

Vikas/Smile did not originally plan to work with the deaf although there were others within the International Fellowship who had learned sign language and taught the deaf about Jesus before him both in India and internationally. When Vikas’s/Smile’s oldest daughter was born deaf, he realized that God had wanted him to work with the deaf and he combined his individual activism on behalf of his daughter with working with the deaf more broadly. He learned sign language and outreach techniques from

148 Deafs living all over India knew Vikas as Smile and his name sign seemed to be an attempt by him to cultivate a happy-go-lucky and welcoming persona and presence. A sign name is a unique name used to identify a person that is usually given as a gift by a deaf person.

149 The International Fellowship is an international missionary organization that started in the 1960’s in the United States. As a result of significant controversy around unorthodox sexual practices (including alleged child abuse and prostitution), the group went underground and changed its name, mission, and organizational structure. It is now focused most heavily on international mission work and has a tightly run public relations office. When deaf Indians do research on the International Fellowship, they read about its sordid past and many of its adversaries call it a “cult” or a “sect” and they discuss its “immoral” practices. The heavy pressure that many deaf young adults feel is placed on them to come to International Fellowship deaf meetings (often called “forcing”), the hierarchical structure, and the practice of requiring members of the church’s advanced group to donate ten percent of their income have also fueled peoples’ suspicions about the deaf ministry as a “cult.”
others within the International Fellowship who have worked with the deaf and he set out to do deaf ministry work. But unlike other International Fellowship members who work with the deaf, the scope of Vikas’s/Smile’s work has moved beyond teaching about Jesus and has resulted in the creation of political organizations which engage in contentious politics in relation to the state.

While Vikas/Smile told me many times that he has attempted, to the best of his abilities, to stay behind the scenes and let deaf people run the three organizations which he has helped to start and catalyze (as these are deaf organizations after all), his outsized personality, his desire for attention, and his sense of ownership over the organizations have meant that he is always involved and that deaf people often defer to him for decisions. Those who work within or attend his organizations know him as someone who “loves and helps” deafs (although people outside his organizations think that he is power hungry and controlling, a thief, and a liar; these people offer a myriad of examples to support such perspectives). In addition, as he is normal, he often serves as an interpreter during important political meetings, rallies, and workshops, thus serving to augment his power through his pivotal role in relaying and translating information.

Vikas/Smile has gone further than other members of the International Fellowship in creating a public and political role for himself (indeed, the International Fellowship is known to be a secretive organization) and his organizations. This has led to significant controversy over the role of religion in his organizations and whether or not NIDA is or is not a Christian organization. While I am not interested in labeling NIDA as Christian or secular, nor do I believe that it is analytically possible, I am interested in the new forms of both organization and subjectivity that the intersections of these organizations engender (Comaroff 1991). I argue that it is these intersections between Christian authority and deaf rights that make NIDA so compelling for deaf young adults and that it is also these intersections which provide NIDA and its sister organizations with discursive authority. These intersections also served to establish a deaf hierarchy in which there are leaders and followers.

It often seemed to me that the three organizations established by Vikas/Smile were entangled. I did not know where one organization ended and the others began and deaf leaders were active in the leadership of more than one organization. For instance, Vikas was the founder and first president of NIDA, he is the executive director of the Deaf Empowerment Training Center, and he informally runs the Delhi Deaf Brothers and Sisters Club. The deaf leaders who are directly under him also are involved in more than one organization. The current president of NIDA is on the board of the DETC and is among the leadership at the clubs where he can be found teaching most Sundays when he is not elsewhere on NIDA business. Similarly, the secretary of DETC is also a teacher at the clubs and often attends NIDA meetings. In addition, it must be stressed that it is not only the leadership that circulates between these three organizations.

Computer, English, and personal development teachers at DETC are also often in leadership positions at the clubs and so new DETC students come to see their teachers as

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150 People discuss his fiery temper and his need for deference as well as the fact that he runs a deaf ministry organization to which many deaf people give ten percent of their income. There is no accounting of this money and Vikas/Smile appears to be well off with cars and a nice home-- further kindling suspicions. In addition, people also discuss his alleged affairs with deaf women and his encouragement of men and women mixing socially.
total role models possessing multiple kinds of knowledge, skill, and authority. When new students enroll in courses at the DETC, they soon learn about the “deaf club” or “church” which happens on Sundays and they are encouraged to attend in order to “develop” more. In attending one organization, students are encouraged to attend or participate in the others in order to continue their “development.” For example, I observed a teacher at one of DETC’s training centers interacting with new students. I asked them about the club, and the teacher told me that he himself had been going but that the four students did not know about it and that “slowly slowly I will tell them about it.” As such, attending these training centers can be considered a process-- one does not only learn English or computers, one also (slowly slowly) learns about the clubs and the NIDA. One is slowly introduced to Jesus and deaf rights after learning some English and computers.

Deaf students at the training center and the church also find out about NIDA as NIDA’s publications are prominently displayed at the training center and announcements are made about NIDA at both the training center and the clubs. In addition, personal development materials for the training center are often produced from International Fellowship comic books and these comic books and bibles could be found displayed on DETC’s shelves. Money is raised for NIDA at both the training center and the clubs. Along the same lines, at club picnics attendees are encouraged to pray for the success of the NIDA and at NIDA marches I noticed that the majority of deafs present were from the clubs. And so these three organizations overlapped and vocational training, church, and political activism articulated to create an emerging deaf formation that provided development in the form of job skills, learning about Jesus, and learning about deaf rights.

Let me say something here about the physical spaces that each of the three organizations occupied in Delhi. The DETC is located in a dense office park in south Delhi where computer dealerships, printing shops, and financial offices surrounded its small office and classroom. While this dense office park is a rather incongruous setting for a vocational training center for deaf young adults, it provides opportunities for witnessing and fund raising for the organization. Students come for training from all over Delhi and are recruited through word of mouth, former students, and at the clubs. The training center is open from Monday to Saturday. The clubs, open on Sunday, are located all over the National Commonwealth Region (NCR) adjacent to Delhi and there are two physical sites within Delhi proper: one is a church located in central Delhi and the other is a Catholic school in posh south Delhi. The NIDA formerly met at the training center but now has its own small offices in west Delhi although as this office is quite far from the city center, meetings are often held in the evenings at McDonalds, coffee shops, and other centrally located restaurants. NIDA work is also done at the training center and previously, the training center and NIDA shared NIDA’s one paid interpreter and staff person-- further highlighting interconnections and interdependencies.

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151 Students and employees who were engaged in fundraising for the DETC often referred to their efforts as “witnessing.” Due to the entanglements of the three organizations, witnessing for the DETC meant that the other two organizations were being witnessed for as well. It was never clear how money circulated between the three organizations.

152 As meetings were often held in the evening, there were usually fewer women present than men. There were a few young women who always came to meetings and they told me that they were INDEPENDENT STRONG or “independent and strong” and that they could travel alone at night even though their families were a bit worried.
As for the deaf young adults who circulated through these spaces: the students at the training center were in their late teens to early twenties and most had recently finished their secondary school leaving certificate (SSLC) at one of Delhi’s deaf schools. There were a few who were studying pre-university courses or higher education (bachelors of commerce or bachelors of arts) through correspondence courses. Their teachers at the training center were of the same age or slightly older. Most of them had completed the courses that they were now teaching and had longterm relationships with their current students as they had attended the same schools while growing up. Attendees at the clubs and NIDA members were of this same age range although there were a few men and women over the age of thirty. And church and NIDA leaders were all in their mid thirties to early forties. While most participants within these three organizations were middle class, there were also some upper class participants. Participants represented all castes and religions and people generally knew of other peoples’ religious backgrounds. However, while these religious and caste backgrounds were known, they did not create hierarchies nor did they mark status differences; differences collapsed through the pursuit of the same kinds of development and shared love of Jesus. Instead, status differences and hierarchy were created through being a teacher or a student, a shepherd or a sheep, someone who eats meat or someone who drinks milk.

Many church goers told me that they aspired to be teachers and leaders and being given a teaching assignment to teach others about the Word was a source of pride and status. One enthusiastic young man, Alim, told me about returning monthly to his hometown, a small city in Uttar Pradesh, where he taught the deafs living there problem solving skills and the Word. He goes for one day only, taking overnight buses each way. He said that he meets with the leaders in Delhi before each trip to discuss what to teach and how to teach it. He hopes that one day one of the Delhi leaders will accompany him in order to show the deafs in his hometown “Delhi power.” By “Delhi Power,” he meant the confidence and wisdom that the church leaders exerted as well as their ability to act politically through the NIDA.

When I asked Alim how he taught, he told me that it “is very slow, like a mango tree growing,” and that he starts with simple sign language stories and comics and teaches new concepts. He is patient, he says, and cannot rush through his teaching. This young man is a mango tree as well, being nurtured by Vikas/Smile and the deaf leaders to be a teacher. While Alim is a patient teacher of the Word, he is also always involved in NIDA marches and protests. When it comes to deaf rights and NIDA work, however, Alim is not patient. One can be patient in regards to deaf spiritual development but not when it comes to deaf rights. The temporality of deaf spiritual development is different from the temporality of attaining deaf rights.

While conducting preliminary research in Delhi during the summers of 2006 and 2007, and during the year of 2009-2010, I spent two months attempting to understand how these three organizations fit together and what the individual organizational pieces meant for the deaf world that they comprised. One Sunday, I asked a leader at the club

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153 Students had to pay to attend courses at the training center. As such, only students with some means could attend. There were other organizations in Delhi providing free training such as the PIDL sponsored Deaf Vocational Skills Center.

154 For example, a young man of Muslim background had “Muslim” in his name sign which was signed as the first letter of his first name and then the sign for Muslim.
what the difference was between the three organizations. He told me: “[NIDA] is for advocacy and support, [the training center] is for jobs, and [the clubs] are for brotherhood.” Similarly, a NIDA volunteer and club member told me that NIDA supported him in fighting for deaf colleges, a disability act, and interpreters while the clubs supported him in teaching him good behavior and manners. Another leader within both NIDA and the clubs told me that members of the clubs founded the NIDA because they realized that there were some problems that they could solve on their own but then there were other problems that had to do with “law and rights” and so they decided to establish the NIDA. NIDA is committed to solving problems “on our own” as well as through organizing deafs around India, setting up protests, writing bills, and filing lawsuits.\(^\text{155}\)

Dheeraj, a former teacher at the training center and a member of the club, told me something which made me aware of the importance of seeing the organizations as entangled forms: “The church helps you to develop and learn and helps you to see the importance of NIDA and so while they are separate, it is developed people from the church who know that NIDA’s work is important.” Dheeraj’s comment highlights both the importance of the clubs in providing for deaf development and the specificity of the kinds of deaf development that the clubs provide-- development which helps deaf young adults realize the importance of activism and contentious politics. The Christian development vision of the clubs smoothly translates into desires for political rights.

This vision of development promotes notions of participation within both normal and deaf worlds and creates a sense of entitlement to deaf rights and opportunities. It is also development which privileges activism and action as well as the power inherent in deaf people acting together. And it is development which gives deaf people the moral and linguistic tools to evaluate both themselves and others. While Dheeraj does not mention power or authority, it is clear that the church provides deaf young adults with a moral authority from which to act. God wants all people to participate in the world and deaf people want to participate. The Word talks about good behavior and deaf church-goers want to behave well. But they need communication access, education, and employment opportunities in order to do this. And so it follows that Jesus and God want deaf rights and deaf development in the name of deaf rights.

Many deafs told me that they were “spoiled” and “dull” before they joined the clubs and that they used to fight with their parents, siblings, and teachers. However, once they joined the clubs they learned good behavior and they became less angry. Being “spoiled” and “dull” in this sense means that one does not communicate well with others or participate in the world. It also means that one is not learning or on a path towards knowledge and understanding. One is oblivious to the idea of deaf development. Indeed, the younger sister of one club leader, Veena, told me that Veena “became a different person after she started going to the clubs…she became a girl again.” Being “spoiled” and “dull” is opposed to interacting with others in a reflective and self-aware way. Church-going thus creates humans out of bare life (Agamben 1998) in that it gives deafs both a moral compass for participating in both deaf and normal worlds and a sense of discursive authority from which to both evaluate themselves and others. It also instills a desire for deaf development and creates opportunities for such development.

\(^{155}\) As none of the deaf leaders in NIDA are able to write in the high level English needed for such documents, Vikas/Smile does a lot of the writing as do international volunteers and interns.
Veena is a feisty and vivacious woman in her early thirties who attracted my attention as I saw her at almost all of the protests, marches, and social events that I attended. She was extremely confident and her signing was large and forceful. I decided to interview her and her younger sister, who works as a sign language interpreter and an administrator at the DETC, together one afternoon. Veena told me that she became deaf at the age of four after she poured hot oil over her head. Her sister said that she was always very naughty and that after she became deaf and was sent to the government school for the deaf in Delhi, she became even more naughty. She would stab her classmates with pencils and she slapped one of her teachers; she hated wearing her uniform and she preferred doing sports to sitting in the classroom where she was not learning anyways as her teachers merely wrote on the board for the students to copy and memorize. When she was around fourteen, an older classmate of hers noticed her behavior and invited her to come to the club.

Veena accepted his invitation and she said that the first time she went she was amazed at how well everyone at the deaf club behaved. She said that “they did not look deaf in their manners and how they dressed” as they signed nicely and comported themselves with confidence. In confusion and amazement she went around and asked everyone she met if they were deaf. After seeing these “well mannered deafs,” she too wanted to behave and to use sign language like they did. This began a transformation and when her mother noticed the change in Veena, she agreed to let her continue going to the clubs (similar to some of the stories of parents permitting their deaf children to attend churches in Chapter Five). Now Veena is married to a church leader and she is also a leader in the church’s womens’ group and in the NIDA. Before, she signed softly but now she must sign strong and hard, she says, because she is a leader. She told me “Before, when I was small, I used to fight for no reason but now I have a reason. I am fighting for my rights.” Veena said that she also engages in advocacy as “there may be another [Veena] out there who needs help like I did before.” But now she is saved. And she has the responsibility, and the authority, to save others as a result of her leadership position in NIDA and the clubs. This desire to help other potential Veenas out there is motivated by her idea of “deaf deaf same;” if there is one Veena, surely there is someone else out there like her.

Jesus as the Patron Saint of the Deaf

As the clubs are the foundation for the NIDA, here I provide some background on them. As a result of the number of attendees, the clubs in Delhi are divided into three groups: beginning, intermediate, and advanced/foundation members. Such structure serves to separate those “who drink milk from those who eat meat,” according to an intermediate level club member, and ensures that everyone is learning on the appropriate level. Those who drink milk are “shallow in the Word” while those who eat meat “are

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156 The government school which Veena attended is notorious for having teachers who do not teach and students who do not learn. I heard many times that teachers sit outside and chat with each other while students are left to copy off of the board and socialize.

157 Signing strong and hard means signing confidently and loudly. It is the equivalent of speaking confidently and loudly.

158 This intermediate member recently moved from Delhi to Haryana and she told me that now she has returned to the beginning group again as she is no longer as strong. Different cities and states have their own organizational structure although materials used, including DVDs and books, come mostly from Delhi.
strong in the Word.” Such hierarchy also allows for people to envision a path of progression and to hope that they might ultimately be able to enter into the advanced group. Members of the intermediate group told me that they aspired to join the advanced group “for maximum benefit” although advanced group members have additional responsibilities: they have an additional class on Thursday nights and they are required to write essays for Vikas/Smile and contribute ten percent of their income as a tithe to the church. I never learned how deafs were able to move up in between the groups although when I asked, the answer I received was that Vikas/Smile and deaf leaders were always evaluating attendees based on attendance, conduct, and participation and that if they felt that someone was ready to move up, they would move them up. As such, there was always a feeling of being watched, evaluated, and judged.

A sample Sunday club meeting for all three levels will consist of a few sign language praise songs, prayer, a bible story, and news about NIDA. Attendees will take notes and in the beginning group, teachers will teach attendees the nuts and bolts of different prayers, the importance of praying, and different new signs. Attendees who are new to sign language copy things into their books, often without understanding, and they say that they will practice what they have learned. Indeed, they are exhorted to practice praying and reading the bible. Members of the clubs have badges with their names and they are required to sign in on a sign up sheet either located on a table near the entrance or in a three ring binder that is circulated. Members of the advanced group have to check off whether they have brought a bible and a pencil to the club as well.

According to Vikas and other leaders this sign up sheet is necessary as occasionally deafs will tell their parents that they are going to the clubs but they are really meeting boyfriends or girlfriends and in the past the leadership has come under fire from irate parents. In order to address such issues, church leaders also exhort attendees to tell them who their boyfriends and girlfriends are and what they are doing when they are not at the clubs. In the amount of information that is shared with leaders and other club members, the clubs seem to take the place of deaf attendees’ families; club leaders often have more information about deaf attendees’ than attendees’ families.

Meetings are therefore quite regimented and members of the advanced group who do not attend for a few weeks are often called on to explain where they have been and why they have failed to come regularly. Those involved do not seem to mind or question this disciplinary aspect. Deaf leaders, mostly men in their late thirties and early forties, are revered and respected-- although I have often heard deafs complain that the deaf

While this choice of phrasing-- “those who drink milk and those who eat meat”-- might seem quite alien, most church attendees did eat meat at one point or another while out with friends from church.

I talked to one young man after he attended the beginning club for the first time. He told me that he intended to keep going to the clubs “for life” and while he could not remember what he had learned, he showed me his notebook and said that he would practice so that he could remember. His notebook cover had been decorated using magic markers and said “Jesus church” on the cover. This desire to go to church “for life” seems to me to be quite similar to a desire for a government job “for life:” both ostensibly offer stability and development.

A few years ago, a deaf young man was found dead on train tracks in Delhi, allegedly accidentally run over by a train. He was a club member. A few weeks later, his girlfriend also died, allegedly through suicide. The clubs were blamed for the deaths by other deafs not involved in the clubs and there was much rumor and speculation. During a beginning class, I observed a leader tell the class this story and she told them that they had to tell church leaders if they had “love” (girlfriends or boyfriends) so that if something happened to their “love,” the church could comfort them and prevent them from committing suicide.
leaders are quite “strict.” Discipline, strictness, and hierarchy seemed to be very important within the clubs, the training center, and NIDA. Leaders derive their authority from their knowledge of the Word, their ability to teach it, and their relationship with Vikas/Smile.

The importance of discipline and hierarchy was made obvious to me when I attended a week long National Deaf Youth Leadership Program (NDYLP or leadership program) which was held in Mysore, Karnataka in February 2009. Vikas/Smile organizes these programs on a yearly basis and they are held each year in a different location so that attendees may visit and experience new places. Deaf young adults from deaf clubs all over India came as did deaf leaders from Delhi and elsewhere who were responsible for running training centers and deaf clubs in different states. This coming together therefore created a temporary pan-Indian deaf church community. I met the Delhi group in Bangalore as they had taken a thirty plus hour train from Delhi to Bangalore (and most of them had not slept at all during these thirty plus hours, so great was the desire to chat and share news) and from Bangalore we took a slow train to Mysore (about three and a half hours) where we set up base at a Catholic retreat center. Vikas/Smile told us on the first night that we had to go to sleep by 10:00 at night and not chat nonstop as is often the norm at deaf gatherings. Indeed, a few of the women leaders shut the lights off in the womens’ dorm at ten sharp regardless of whether or not we were still talking or praying. Throughout the week, we were exhorted to pay attention, take notes, wash our plates carefully, clean our rooms, use less water, and come to classes and prayer services on time. These orders did not only come from leaders but from other participants. It was quite common to see people nudging each other to pay attention and focus on the lectures. Disciplining others was seen as socially acceptable in light of the moral stakes of participating in this program.

In between lectures and workshops, there were energizing songs and games to keep us awake. One of these games in particular was quite fascinating for what it means for thinking about hierarchy and authority: Robin, a charismatic deaf leader with stylish long hair and hip fashion sense, often lead us in a game of “Jesus Says…” in which we were instructed to do all of the things that Jesus told us to do: touch our toes, put our hands on our heads, jump up and down, spin around, and so on. When Robin neglected to sign “Jesus says,” we were supposed to refuse to follow the instructions because they were coming merely from Robin and not from Jesus. However, disobeying Robin was difficult for many of us to do; even though he was not Jesus, he was a deaf leader and therefore we had to respect him. Were we supposed to obey Jesus or the deaf leader? Which was the dominant authority and how did these two kinds of authorities articulate together? Some of the the value of Jesus and the Word was the way that they propped up and created deaf leaders-- Jesus power became deaf power (and “Delhi power”).

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161 There were no deafs from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, or Kerala present as these states are under the International Fellowship’s south India division. A few months later, the south Indian division also held a youth camp but it was much smaller and as it lacked “Delhi power.” It was a very different atmosphere because there was no discussion of contentious politics.

162 I say “we” here as opposed to “they” or “participants” because I was an active participant in songs and games (although I never led them). While I was often exhorted to pray or lead songs, I felt that I could not do these although I did offer support by chorusing “Amen” with others.

163 This is not to say that Robin, or other deaf leaders, were aloof or removed figures. Some of their power derived from the fact that they had similar experiences to those that they taught and led. Leaders often went
While most of the leadership camp was spent learning and studying the Word, practicing new bible songs, and watching power point presentations about Revelations, we did watch a movie one afternoon about deaf rights and activism in the Philippines. As the movie was mostly in Tagalog and Filipino Sign Language with English subtitles, this meant that most of the deafs present were unable to understand because they could not read the English subtitles fast enough or at all. And so while they were mostly bored and restless (and I was quite thrilled to be back to something more comfortable and familiar to me than the three horses prominently mentioned in Revelations), some of the deafs present did express longing to have what the deaf Filipinos had as they had attained state recognition and had better deaf schools and sign language interpreters. I was quite confused about the connection between this film and teaching the Word, the connection between preparing for end times and learning about deaf rights. When I sent Vikas/Smile a text message asking him about this, he responded:

“The Word is just one part of our life. Deaf rights and culture is part of the deaf identity. Realizing one’s rights, identifying with one’s culture, and worship of one’s God are part of the human experience of life.”

A world is created through such diverse elements brought together under the rubric of deaf development of which Jesus is the patron saint. As Comaroff (1991) points out, missionaries in South Africa brought with them new ways of telling and ordering time and structuring family relations. In this sense, Vikas/Smile is doing something similar through these organizations; deaf lives and values are being re-ordered. The Word and deaf development become embedded in each other and are co-constitutive.

Patiently Impatient

It is interesting to think about the hierarchy of the clubs in relation to the goals that the NIDA aspires towards because they appear to be in conflict (although this hierarchy is seemingly not in conflict with Indian social and political structure more broadly). The mission statement of NIDA is “Let’s come together, know our rights, and claim them” and unlike the Pan Indian Deaf League, NIDA places much stress on “rights” and works with the Disability Rights Group, an activist alliance of different disability rights organizations, to organize demonstrations and protests. The landmark 2009 International Disability Day demonstration, held at India Gate, attracted over three thousand deaf people. These deafs were called from all over India by NIDA to protest the lack of improvement in disability welfare, the failure to implement the eleventh five year plan as well as previous plans which have had specific disability related provisions in it, and the dearth of funding available to disability related government schemes and programs. While this demonstration is held yearly, the numbers in 2009 were unprecedented thanks to the outreach conducted by NIDA via text messages, YouTube to the same schools as deaf students and had similar histories (although, unlike the youth facing an uncertain and precarious job market, many leaders were now “settled” in public sector employment). Leaders were not out of reach and they presented a path that followers could aspire towards. 164 Teachings were about diverse topics such as the importance of not backsliding, spirit helpers, what to do when end times come, and the markings of the Anti-Christ. The International Fellowship is non-denominational and teachings are a bricolage of works from different denominations, often involving letters written by its founder who is known for his unconventional teachings and doctrines.
videos, emails, and word of mouth. For many deafs who participated in this, and in other
color protests, participation was exhilarating and exciting. Repeating what Veena, the church
leader and NIDA member, told me: “Before, when I was small, I used to fight for no
reason. Now I am fighting for my rights.”

The NIDA also dispatches deaf young adults to protests for other issues-- the lack
of electronic books for blind people at the Delhi Book Fair for example-- and is
committed to contributing to advancing disability rights in general while advocating for
specific deaf-focused programs and services. These programs and services include sign
language interpreters, a national sign language institute, closed captioning (subtitles) for
television, better deaf education options and dedicated colleges for the deaf, and drivers
licenses for deaf people. Vikas, and the other NIDA leaders, are not very patient and they
do not like waiting. They post YouTube videos where they exhort people to come
together to fight for deaf rights and the importance of having deaf and normal people be
equal; they talk frequently of activism and protests. In this sense there seems to be
tension between the values and comportment needed to develop the NIDA (patience and
care) and the focus on rights and protesting against the state (impatience and anger). As
mentioned earlier, there are also tensions between hierarchy and the sense of equality
engendered by “rights talk” which proclaims both that all deaf people are the same and
that deaf and normal people are equal. Veena’s position of simultaneously being a church
leader and fighting for deaf rights foregrounds these tensions as well as the tensions
between patience and waiting. A position such as Veena’s allows participants to be
patiently impatient, to affirm sameness while respecting hierarchical organization, and to
be caring and angry at the same time.

The public nature of such deaf protests has made deaf people more visible in the
Indian disability movement. For example, in honor of International Deaf Awareness
Week, the NIDA held an approximately two mile march from India Gate to a location in
central Delhi where protests and political rallies are often held.\textsuperscript{165} I learned about the
march one Sunday during a meeting of the beginning club group when an announcement
was made by a leader that the church would be closed the following Sunday for the
march. The leader told us that all clubs were canceled for the day so that participants in
the march would not have to wait around after church and become tired or hungry. On the
appointed day, which was incredibly hot and sultry, we met at India Gate and wore white
shirts which had the NIDA logo on them; some of us held banners with NIDA’s name on
them.

We marched with the leadership standing in the front of the procession alternating
between ordering us to hurry or walk slowly. Deafs defiantly drove motorcycles to
protest the ban on deaf drivers licenses and people gave out flyers about sign language
along the way. At the end of the march, members of the clubs performed mime about
deaf rights and we were given information about a lawsuit that the Human Rights Law
Network had filed on behalf of NIDA in support of deaf people driving. For many
participants, this was their first exposure to a deaf march and the first time that they had
engaged in a public display of deafness. After the march was over, I asked a few deafs
what they thought about the march and they said that they learned about their rights from

\textsuperscript{165} Coincidentally, the church where the beginning and intermediate Delhi-based groups meet are located in
this area as well and I was not sure at first where the march was going to end up-- if we were going to end
at the church or at the location where rallies and protests are held.
NIDA. Immediately after telling me this they told me that they also were learning about Jesus and the Word at the deaf clubs— they did not distinguish between learning about deaf rights and learning about Jesus and the Word. Again, it appeared that learning about Jesus provided the conditions of possibility for learning about deaf rights.

In contrast to this very public march, I attended a day of sports, trivia, rangoli making, and story telling competitions hosted by the Pan Indian Deaf League in honor of International Deaf Awareness Week the Saturday before. This event was held at the Deaf Vocational Skills Center and was attended by PIDL supporters, teachers and students from Delhi Deaf Women’s League, and children from local deaf schools. People participated in the competitions, spent time together, and shared news. There was nothing public, contentious, or political about this event and it was attended by only a small percentage of Delhi deaf people. This event represented a very different way of celebrating International Deaf Awareness Week in that there was no attempt to engage with the larger public and nothing was said about deaf rights or empowerment.

On Guard

When I asked Dharmesh at the PIDL about the NIDA’s tactics, he told me that he thought that marches and protests were useless and only serve to make the government angry at the deaf. Indeed, in an interview with a former government minister in the rehabilitation apparatus, he told me that he believed that NIDA was ruining the name of deaf people and that before they were “the most naïve and innocent of all people and now they have become radical and angry. They have become ruined and their reputations are spoiled. People are afraid of them.” This government official, who did not want his name used because he said that Vikas would make problems for him and show up at his office with angry deafs, said that he preferred to work with the PIDL and that confrontation was not the answer. He did not have a very positive opinion of the world that Vikas and the deaf leadership were creating and it was clear that he felt quite threatened. He also said that he felt that the deafs that participated in NIDA, the clubs, and the training centers were isolating themselves and that “it is better to see yourself as part of the entire ocean not just [these organizations].” He meant that he viewed these organizations as unnecessarily separatist and insular.

In contrast to the PIDL, Vikas/Smile and the NIDA leadership do not work with the government disability apparatus. I was told many times by him and other leaders that the National Institute of Hearing Handicapped (NIHH) privileges oral education and the medical model of providing hearing aids and speech therapy over sign language. I was told that while this institute has a sign language cell and a series of sign language certificate courses, it does not devote enough manpower and funds to sign language development. As such, the NIDA has lobbied for an independent Sign Language Development Institute and funding from the federal government was committed towards this although it is unknown who will administer the institute (as of July 2010). Similarly while there is an Indian Interpreters Association which already exists and whose

167 This government minister was perhaps not accustomed to such contentious rights-based approaches to disability and was more at home in a system of patronage in which the state provides for people with disabilities out of paternalism or pity (see Bhambani 2004 for more information on shifts in Indian government approaches to disability).
leadership consists of interpreters who have been certified by NIHH, Vikas has decided to start his own organization of interpreters which hosts occasional conferences and workshops. As one of the leaders of the Indian Interpreters Association told me: “[Vikas] wants to do everything himself, he wants his own of everything.” Members of Delhi Deaf Women’s League also scoffed and said similar things when they heard that NIDA was establishing a women’s group and holding a women’s conference and they said that NIDA was copying them.

Yet I would argue that the organizations that Vikas/Smile built are not merely copies of organizations that already exist. His interpreters’ organization has a more expansive view of sign language interpreting and members are not required to be certified by the NIHH (a practice which is a source of contention within the wider interpreting world both in India and internationally). In Vikas’ organization, anyone who knows sign language can become an interpreter without having to take courses or take a test. The NIDA women’s group is more focused on recruiting youth than the Delhi Deaf Women’s League and it discusses sensitive and previously taboo issues such as rape, sexual abuse, and violence against women. Much to the consternation of the PIDL and the Delhi Deaf Women’s League, Vikas/Smile’s organizations provide mixed gender trainings on sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, and AIDS.

When I asked Vikas/Smile why he was establishing all of these organizations, his response was twofold: he said that the organizations which already existed were not meeting the needs of deaf young adults and he also said that he, and the members of his organizations, were not accepted by the already existing organizations because they were church-goers. I often heard this second point from church members and leaders who told me that they had attempted to affiliate with and join the PIDL but could not because they were told that they were church-goers. Regular church goers told me of being “hated” and shunned by people who did not go to church. There was very much a sense of persecution felt by members of the churches and they often spoke about this. They needed to be “on guard” to protect their organizations, their precious seeds, from being trampled. They also needed to be “on guard” to protect themselves and their good names. This sense of hostility was obvious when talking to those against the church: I was told again and again by people who were aligned with the PIDL that the church “steals deaf from their families,” that it “uses sign butter to convince deaf young adults to come,” “deafs are forced to give ten percent of their income to the church,” and “the church spoils deafs.” I also heard stories of teachers and students at the Delhi Deaf Women’s League and other non-church affiliated programs being pressured not to attend church.

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168 This lack of standards or certification is thought by some to have a negative effect on the professionalization of interpreting as a field.

169 It must be pointed out that neither the PIDL, NIDA, nor any of the affiliated organizations have done much to reach out to rural deaf people who do not use sign language. It seems to me that these organizations are recruiting a certain kind of deaf person: urban, middle class, and with reasonable sign language skills.

170 One church leader told me that while she had learned a lot about sex, sexual transmitted diseases, HIV and AIDS at the health workshops held by Vikas/Smile, she would only teach unmarried women what she has learned because if she were to teach married women or men, they might think that she has had sex and her name would be spoiled.
While conducting research in Bombay I met Mamata, a former sign language teacher at the National Institute of Hearing Handicapped (NIHH) in Bombay who had become a Bombay club leader. She had learned about the Word from a former classmate of hers from Hyderabad who had come to Bombay to participate in the NIHH sign language teachers training program. Mamata told me that when the administration at the NIHH learned that she was a church/club leader, they told her that she either had to stop teaching in the clubs or she had to resign from her post as a teacher at the NIHH. The administration viewed these two activities as incompatible; they felt that Mamata would be unable to separate one from the other and that she would witness to the deaf students in her sign language classes about Jesus and the Word.

The NIHH administrators, perhaps rightfully, felt that Mamata would be unable to separate the “private” matter of religion from the “public” teaching of sign language as for deaf members of the clubs, the training center, and NIDA, there is no such separation, they are all part of being “saved.” This is the problem of double teaching, or double conversion (as discussed in Chapter Five), in which language, sociality, and responsibility are bundled together. Deafs feel a sense of responsibility to pass on what is learned and forms of development and learning cannot be compartmentalized into “public” and “private” or “religious” and “secular” spaces; everything is oriented towards developing oneself and other deafs. One wants to use the Word to witness about deaf development and to help nourish deaf people. And this lack of boundaries is one of the problems that the PIDL and the state ultimately have with Vikas/Smile and the organizations that he founded. Mamata’s story is not an isolated one as I spoke with other NGO administrators who told me that teachers who were involved with the club were constantly witnessing both during and after class hours and that it was difficult to get them to stop. Similarly, deafs involved with the clubs told me that they loved witnessing and that it was their responsibility to do so. One young man who was able to lipread and communicate well with normals using his voice told me that he hoped to start witnessing to normals as “there are already enough leaders working with the deaf,” perhaps a commentary on how saturated the deaf witnessing field is.

Who is Saved and Who is Spoiled?

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, SAVE or “saved” and SPOIL or “spoiled” were the poles that deafs bounced between and I suggest that these are moral poles with social, economic, and political (hence worldly and world creating) stakes for deafs. “Saved” and “spoiled” function as authoritative concepts and as poles for mapping ones’ relations with others as well as ones’ moral place in the deaf world. As the concepts “saved” and “spoiled” were part of everyday discourse utilized by all deafs, I struggled to understand what was at stake. Consider the following three quotes:

“My name is Vinit. Saved, what is the meaning, I will explain for you. Before, no one taught me, I did not learn. I almost went in a bad way. I was almost spoiled. Then I came here [DETC] and they taught me. I learned. I was saved. Thank you

Mamata decided to stop being a club leader in order to maintain her job at the NIHH although she said that she continued to keep what she had learned at the clubs in her heart and mind. She has since left the NIHH and is working at the United Foundation, another deaf-run organization, which I discuss in Chapter Eight.

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so much for that!! I am grateful. That is what saved means” (Vinit, Computer teacher at the training center, B-level club member, frequent attendee at NIDA events and protests).

“Before when I came here, [the DETC secretary] taught me. When I was growing up, there was no sign language, it was a problem in school, I didn’t learn anything. Nothing. The same with students here. They go to school, there is no sign language, nothing. They are spoiled. Then they come here and they learn English and Sign language and it is good and they are saved. Saved” (Sanjay, DETC administrator, teacher, and web developer, advanced group member and intermediate and beginning group teacher).

“My mother and father realized that I was deaf and so they put me in school. The teacher talked and wrote on the board and I didn’t understand anything- I failed to learn and I chatted and chatted with my deaf friends. I didn’t know how to think about and plan for the future. Then I passed tenth class and I joined here, [DETC], and I learned well. I learned English and computers. Words’ meanings were explained to me and also I learned how to eat nicely, I learned not to fight with my mother, to show respect and communicate with her nicely, I learned to help at my home with cleaning and not to ignore that. I enjoyed it very much and was very interested. I learned that if there was a problem and I was tense instead of thinking myself I should share it with others. I learned love, respect, and communication. Before I knew nothing and I was lost. Now I am saved. Thank you Jesus lord. Amen” (Shivani, DETC former student and current fundraiser, intermediate group member, and NIDA women’s group board member).

For Vinit, Sanjay, and Shivani, “saved” meant practicing good behavior through showing respect for others and learning educational and life skills. Learning here includes learning the Word and learning how to communicate well in sign language with other deafs and with normals. It also means developing professional skills to be used for employment. When I asked Shivani for further elucidation about what she had learned, she told me that she had learned about HIV, AIDS, how to greet new people and offer them hospitality, and how to communicate using English and sign language. More broadly, being “saved” means being a specific kind of moral deaf person who is eager to learn the Word, share it with others, and to fight for deaf rights.

Being “saved” also requires that one feels grateful to the deafs who do the “saving.” One also feels relief as one could have been spoiled; one could have easily missed this opportunity to become a part of this particular deaf world and attain deaf development. Or as Vinit put it so eloquently: “It is like a deaf person walking on the train tracks and not realizing that a train is coming. This person can be killed but someone pulls them away.” What seems essential is that “saving” comes from outside oneself-- from other deafs-- and not from within: someone else pulls you away. One does not “save” oneself (although one can “spoil” oneself). Structures and institutions such as the training center, the clubs, and NIDA provide “saving.”

Being “saved” means that one is on a path from bare life (Agamben 1998) or bad life to being a good person who desires and ultimately experiences deaf development. It means that one comes to have access to and an understanding of forms of discursive
authority (the Word and deaf rights) that aid in deaf development. After being “saved,” one then must go out and “save” other deaf people out of a sense of responsibility, authority, and feelings of gratitude; this is why witnessing is so important. Far from being isolated or “outside the general ocean,” as the anonymous government minister whom I discussed earlier stated, these deafs want to transform the entire ocean. The goal of deaf development in this case means saving everyone and bringing him or her into this world.

It is important to stress that Dharmesh and other deafs not affiliated with NIDA, the clubs, or the training center (those who were in opposition to this world), also invoke the same morally fraught landscape and the same poles of “saved” and “spoiled” except that the poles are flipped on their head. However, I argue that for these other deafs there is no state of being “saved;” there is only the absence of being “spoiled.” And this may fundamentally be why the PIDL is losing youth. For Dharmesh, the PIDL, and others, there does not seem to be any salvation (and its accompanying feelings of gratitude and relief) although there is the always present risk of being spoiled.

Why do Dharmesh and others argue that membership in this world “spoils” deaf young adults? I was told that young men and young women sit together in the clubs, that members of the opposite sex hug each other hello and goodbye, and that the clubs use attractive women to try to lure young men to come to church. I was also told that leaders of the clubs encourage premarital sex and dating and that they also encourage deaf youth to lie to their parents about where they are going. In addition, NIDA was considered to be too radical and angry. There was always a litany of complaints being leveled against NIDA, Vikas, and the deaf leaders. Many of the anxieties related to what were perceived to be corruptive “western” influences on dress, comportment, and ways of interacting with people of the opposite sex (also see Friedner 2010a).

The PIDL and NIDA had different visions of what ideal deaf subjectivity was although both visions involved participation in the normal world through having access to institutions, employment, goods, and services. For the PIDL, the ideal deaf subject waits patiently for progress and engages in convivial relationships with the state. He has close ties with his biological family and respects his family’s traditions; he does not stray and is therefore the “good deaf child.” He attends “Flag Day” celebrations and deaf sports events. In contrast, for NIDA, church, and training center leaders, the ideal deaf subject is someone who fights for his rights and challenges the state; he is not patient in this realm. He has different understandings of gender roles and is able to stand up to his parents if his parents refuse to let him attend church. He is also someone who accepts the authority that derives from Jesus and he will submit to a deaf hierarchy of followers and leaders, sheep and shepherd, and those who drink milk and those who eat meat, in his desire to nourish a new deaf world. However, I want to point out that within this construction of the world, people were constantly being judged as “good” or “bad.” It seemed to me that such a worldview did not allow for both/and; deafs had to be either/or, a form of ontological violence. As they could not be members of both PIDL and NIDA, deafs were either “saved” or “spoiled,” depending on who was evaluating. (And this is why I always felt so anxious.)

Conclusion

And what of the future? Similar to the Bangalore based training centers where I conducted research, the DETC also provided job placement and worked with human
resource specialists who placed people with disabilities in jobs. However it seemed to me that finding people jobs was not as high a priority for Vikas and the other deaf leaders. They were more concerned with cultivating a new worldview focused on valuing deaf rights and deaf culture and loving Jesus; they were more interested in the “big picture.” While there was often talk about the future-- in the future, the government will finally allocate funds for developing a sign language institute and better deaf education and in the future, end times will occur and deafs must save other deafs and their families-- deafs were very wrapped up in the present of creating this emerging world of “our” organizations.

This world was extremely present oriented in its focus on cultivating a specific moral landscape divided into those who were “saved” and “spoiled.” As part of this landscape, deafs were constantly evaluating others and themselves. It is through the scaffolding provided by this binary that deafs were able to create a moral compass for viewing this landscape and themselves. Through attending events, workshops and classes, and witnessing, deaf young adults involved in this world seemed entirely wrapped in these three institutions and the dense everyday that they produced. Everything in this world, from folding NIDA newspapers and distributing them to friends, to taking a thirty plus hour train ride to Bangalore for a leadership program, was embedded with multiple registers of meaning that all came together to produce “saved” and “spoiled” deafs.

In conclusion, the articulation of the deaf clubs, the training centers, and the NIDA offer new ways of thinking about the intersection of cultural and religious politics in creating both new forms of authority as well as new ways of interacting with the state. As I noted earlier, NIDA’s current general secretary told me repeatedly that he wanted NIDA to be affiliated with the PIDL and that he wanted to work together with the PIDL. However, Dharmesh refused because of the connection between the NIDA and the church. In response to NIDA’s application for affiliation, Dharmesh replied that NIDA was a church organization and so could not be permitted to affiliate. NIDA’s secretary and Vikas/Smile claim that NIDA is separate from the church and that it is secular; I heard this claim made on multiple occasions. However, the organizations were entangled and this entanglement was perhaps from where the organization derived its transformative and world-making power. There is both a sun and a greenhouse to nourish the flower. Christianity remade deaf spaces and deaf spaces remade Christianity as deaf people used the power and authority of Christianity to create both new senses of deaf development and a political deaf movement.

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172 This present orientation was often very frustrating to directors of other training centers who told me that there were occasions when deafs would not study for exams or when they would leave work early because they said that “Jesus would help them study” or “Jesus gave them permission.”

173 Vikas and the deaf leaders alternate between craving the legitimacy offered by the PIDL and defiantly saying that they do not need the PIDL. Vikas has attended the WFD congress as an observer and NIDA leaders also attended regional WFD meetings. However, without affiliation with PIDL, they can only be observers and not delegates.
Chapter Eight: New Possibilities/Welcome to India

“Times are Changing for Deaf People.”

In May of 2009 I attended an information session in Bombay for a new Bachelor of Arts course in Applied Sign Language Studies designed especially for deaf students that would be starting soon. This would be the first program of its kind in India and one of the few in the world at large. The course would be located in New Delhi, an approximately twelve hour train ride from Bombay, and so Atul Deshmukh, the B.A. program coordinator and one of the program’s instructors, had his job cut out for him in trying to convince parents to permit their children to attend. I sat on the floor in this crowded orientation session, one of a few happening that day, amidst parents and deaf young adults, as Atul confidently told everyone (in one session using his own voice to speak in Hindi and English and in another, signing in Indian Sign Language (ISL) and using an interpreter) that “times are changing for deaf people.” He talked about how he was studying for a Ph.D. in applied sign language linguistics in the United Kingdom, and how I, a visiting deaf researcher, was also doing a Ph.D. at an American university. He also mentioned other deaf people from Bombay and elsewhere in India who were also studying for an M.A. or a Ph.D. He told the nervous parents sitting in the room that deaf children no longer had to be content with welding, electrical, or computer related vocational training and that there were different ways of thinking about deaf education and deaf futures.174 His argument was that there were new possibilities and different structures of opportunity available to deaf people and that he, I, and other deafs were evidence of this.

Atul told us a story about a recent commute on a Bombay suburban train during which he encountered a deaf secondary school student who looked familiar to him. He had tapped the boy in greeting but the boy refused to talk to him because he was frantically cramming for his secondary school leaving certificate (SSLC) exam by looking at his notebooks and trying to memorize facts. Atul said that the boy had the telltale signs of a morning temple visit, a tilak, on his forehead, and that the boy’s success on the exam depended on how well he could remember the facts that he had memorized. The way that Atul signed this test taking technique was telling: knowledge is drawn into one’s head as a chunk and then dumped onto the exam paper also as a chunk (see images below). It is not processed or reflected upon. In learning this way, students do not create or think independent thoughts. And according to Atul, this system is “not real education.” He stated that “real education” required the ability to engage in analysis and ask questions. In contrast to the status quo, the new B.A. program would introduce a different model of education, a model that would make deaf people “independent and proud.”

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174 According to Parasnis et al. (1996), parents and educators of the deaf in India have a narrow view of what kinds of career options are suitable for deaf young adults. The majority of people whom they interviewed believed that manual or low-skill trades involving physical labor were most appropriate for deaf students.
In context, this signed phrase describes rote learning and a specific test-taking technique that can be understood as “information memorize same put on exam.” My interlocutors constantly used this phrase to discuss the status quo of test-taking techniques. Photos provided by Michael Morgan to the author.

The B.A. program for which Atul was conducting outreach represents a new paradigm for both deaf education and deaf development in India. In this chapter, I look at the articulation of different organizations that came together to create this B.A. program and I explore what this program means for thinking about new ideas of deaf development and deaf futures. I argue that this B.A. program functions differently from the nexus of organizations discussed in the last chapter in its tactics of developing a new generation of deaf educators and leaders through teaching deaf people how to teach other deaf people (DEAF TEACH DEAF TEACH DEAF or “deaf teach deaf teach deaf”). For participants within the organizations associated with the new B.A. program, teaching is not just a vocation but it is also a moral project that promotes deaf development. Unlike in the previous chapter where teachers and individuals were respected for their knowledge of the Word and this knowledge was part of deaf development (and being “saved”), deaf development here means that deaf young adults become skilled teachers and are able to think independently while also sharing knowledge and skills with other deafs. The ultimate goal is the creation of deaf-focused organizations and institutions which privilege sign language and provide deafs with educational and vocational opportunities which allow them to “be equal to normals.” Along with this development comes the moral imperative to share knowledge and skills with other deafs, which creates tensions between “independence” and “sharing.” These concepts existed as competing ways of being in the world for students in the B.A. program, as I will demonstrate. Both qualities were seen as essential for deaf development but they were also mutually incompatible.

In this chapter I analyze the development of this B.A. program. In addition to participant observation conducted at information sessions held in Bombay and Bangalore, I also draw on examination of its recruitment materials. I outline the organizations that are the foundation for the B.A. program and I explore how deaf young adults take what I call a deaf turn and become invested in both these organizations and the B.A. program. As I also spent time attending classes and visiting with students who enrolled in the first batch of this program, I draw on participant observation and informal interviews conducted during the often heady and anxious first days of this program as well as follow up observations and interviews conducted after courses had been in session for a few months. As this is an international program that is jointly organized by the Institute for
Deaf Studies (IDS) at the University of the Highlands in the United Kingdom, I also traveled there to conduct interviews. While the emergence of this program is an international story, most of the research in this chapter is focused on India and the specific stakes of this program for deaf Indians.

Deaf Teach Teach Deaf Teach Deaf

The May 2009 information session which I opened this chapter with was held at the United Foundation, a non-governmental organization established with the aim of advancing literacy, education, and leadership among deaf people, located in a Bombay suburb. United was started in 2005 by both deaf and normal educators, many who previously worked at or were affiliated with the Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for Hearing Handicapped (NIHH) in Mumbai (and who are now affiliated with the B.A. program). Sigrid Helmreich, currently the director of IDS and a linguist known for her work on ISL, was also directly involved in setting up United. Those involved were frustrated by a lack of appropriate bilingual (in sign language and English) education, a lack of deaf centered teaching tools, and the nonexistence of deaf teachers in deaf schools throughout India. As a result, course materials were developed for deaf teachers to teach deaf students English bilingually through sign language and United opened its doors in December 2005.

United’s ultimate aim was to establish a B.A. program in sign language for deaf young adults and an introductory information video from 2005 (signed in ISL) found on its website mentions that its goal was to establish such a program within three years. United was thus the foundation and the launching point of the B.A. program. Its goal was to create deaf students who would be proficient enough in English and eager to become teachers— and therefore both competent and desirous of attending the new B.A. program. United’s headquarters are in Bombay although there are also United programs in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. United was thus the crucible of a new kind of deaf present and future that revolved around receiving and providing deaf education. One of United’s founders told me in an email message: “We believe that deaf people would be the best teachers for deaf children because of [their knowledge of] ISL (and therefore being able to impart the knowledge easily) and also because they are extremely motivated to help the next deaf generation.”

This founder’s statement about deaf people being ideal teachers as a result of being “extremely motivated to help the next deaf generation” is interesting to consider. As I will discuss later in this chapter, deaf young adults often take a deaf turn through which they learn about possible careers as teachers and they embrace these opportunities for what they offer: a place at the top of deaf hierarchies, an escape from other kinds of employment which are seen as monotonous and unsatisfying, and the ability to work with and help other people who are like oneself. In many of my interviews with deaf people engaged in any kind of teaching position, I was told: “Normals do not know sign

175 There are no deaf teachers working in government paid positions in government run or licensed schools. There are occasionally deaf teachers who are paid by international non-governmental organizations or privately by individual schools but they are far and in between. The few deaf teachers that I talked to in Delhi, Bangalore, and Mysore (one in each city respectively) spoke about being marginalized by their normal colleagues and not treated as equals in terms of responsibility given to them. Deaf people are not permitted to enroll in RCI accredited education degree programs in Special Education and Deaf Education.
language so how can they teach deaf? I know sign language and so I can do it. Besides I am deaf too, I am the same as my students.” The few deaf teachers at schools and training programs who I met in Bangalore, Delhi, and elsewhere loved their work although many lamented the fact that teaching paid rather poorly and that they were still subservient to normal principals and administrators. Yet the sentiments of a current United teacher who used to work at Café Coffee Day seemed to be quite universally held: “Thank God I do not have to do such work anymore. This is much more interesting.”

Presently United offers two levels of English classes in Bombay: beginning or A level and intermediate or B level courses. The B level course, in addition to twice weekly English courses, also includes an internship component through which students teach basic English courses in sign language in one of Bombay’s deaf schools. While enrolled in B level courses and completing internships, students can become teachers for A level courses for which they are paid a competitive salary. A level classes occur throughout the day, and at different locations throughout Bombay, therefore offering options to people who either work during the day or attend schools or training programs. Classes are small with no more than ten students per class and students and teachers have friendly peer relationships that spill outside the classroom. Students will stay after class and chat and teachers often come to work early to hang out and observe other teachers’ classes. In addition, students will often meet up at different times to “share” by working together on their homework and practicing their English. The B level intermediate class has structured peer learning time built into the curriculum. Sharing is often talked about and it is a significant part of United’s ethos. Indeed, students often told me that they learned the curriculum through sharing with other students.

Students and teachers are mutually invested in each other and there is a sense of collaboration and shared purpose that permeates classes. Teachers are not “perfect”: most of them have only passed the A level course and make mistakes when teaching English grammar. This imperfection is often stressed and students are reminded of it. Grammar mistakes come to light when master teachers observe classes and gently make corrections. These corrections are accepted good naturedly by both teachers and students. Similarly, as there are occasionally overlaps between A level and B level class times, teachers and students, as mutual learners, must engage in negotiation and compromise. A level classes occasionally need to be fifteen minutes shorter to provide a teacher with enough time to reach a B level class that she is enrolled in. I asked one teacher, Ruma, about this as we walked from the A level class that she was teaching in a satellite classroom to the main United building, about a kilometer away, and she said that while

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176 The few deaf young adults working at Bangalore based vocational training programs (DPA and Employment Center) were far more ambivalent about teaching than those involved with United because they did not see teaching as a viable long term option due to low pay. However, those involved with United and the B.A. program saw teaching as more than just a vocation: it was a moral project. In addition, United’s teachers were paid more than deaf teachers at other NGOs and schools.

177 Most of the interns spoke highly of these internships as in some cases they were returning to their old schools as teachers. In addition, according to both United’s former director and the principal of one of the deaf schools which has United interns, the schools are happy to have these interns as they are a source of free labor and the students are enthusiastic about having deaf teachers.

178 Funding comes from a private philanthropic group which funds deaf education and development projects in India. There are occasionally tensions over student numbers and United must balance recruiting enough students for potential teachers to teach and maintaining small class size.
the students were initially not happy about classes ending earlier, she explained to them: “My education is also important and is equal to your education. I need to develop too.” and so her students accepted the class ending early. The overarching goal is deaf development through learning English and both students and teachers are on a path towards such development; both are engaged in a trajectory of learning English and as such negotiations occasionally happen.

During an A level class that I attended, Sonali, the regular teacher, had asked Ritu, a more advanced teacher with more teaching experience, to substitute for her for that particular class so that she could watch her teach and learn from her. Sonali sat with her students and took notes. During the class, Brinda, another A level teacher who was not teaching at that particular time, also sat down to watch Ritu teach. The class was extremely collaborative and dynamic and students sat in a small circle. Ritu signed a series of sentences and students wrote these sentences in their notebooks. The sentences were mixtures of past and present tenses. One series of sentences struck me as particularly telling of United’s teleology: “Five months ago Sonali was a student. Her face was average. Now she is a teacher. She looks beautiful.” Sonali giggled at this short phrase and her students smiled.

I argue that this was not only a touching series of sentences but rather reflected United’s goal of creating beautiful deaf teachers. Ritu, one of United’s first teachers and a former ISL teacher at the NIHH, was a model of this beautiful deaf teacher in that she was confident in the classroom and an excellent signer but not hierarchical or strict with students. In talking with one of United’s former directors, David, I learned that Ritu had taught Brinda, another A level teacher, and then Brinda had taught Sonali in their respective A level classes. “Ritu teach Brinda teach Sonali” is a perfect example of “deaf teach deaf teach deaf” which is arguably the ethos of United. David told me that at times it seemed that Sonali and Brinda copied everything that Ritu did and he worried about this because he wanted the teachers to develop their own teaching styles. He viewed copying as antithetical to this. United’s director stressed developing one’s own teaching style as a sign of independence and critical thinking and therefore a departure from the status quo of deaf education although not all of United’s students and teachers understood this.

In a conversation with two B level students who are also A level teachers, I asked them what the goal of teaching was. One young woman told me: “What you learn, the same way you teach”—something that I was told by many other teachers and apprentices as well. The other young woman in our conversation disagreed with this statement and said: “No, you need to match your teaching to your students. What you learn in B level class you can not teach to small children. You cannot always teach the same way you learn.” The tension between LEARN SAME TEACH (“learn same teach”) and LEARN MODIFY TEACH (“learn modify teach”) is analogous to the tension that Atul mentioned during his B.A. program information session when he talked about the differences between Indian methods of education. This is the tension between “You memorize and then the same thing you write during an exam” (“information memorize same put on exam”) and the methods used in the B.A. program: “You read and learn and then you form your own opinion and explain this during the exam.” (“learn own ideas develop write”). Yet such independent development of teaching techniques and styles was often difficult for teachers (after years spent within Indian educational institutions
which value memorizing) and they stayed close to the models provided by deaf teachers who came before them. After all these teachers were seen as deaf people who were further along in the process of developing and becoming a skilled teacher. Teachers also “shared” techniques and best teaching practices and attended each others’ classes to learn from each other. As such, the boundary between sharing and copying was often hazy. In any case, copying other deafs who were further along the path towards being good teachers was generally considered to be acceptable. This tension between sharing and copying perhaps heightened the tension between sharing and independence because if the boundaries between sharing and copying are hazy, what does this mean for thinking about independence? Can there be an independent copier?¹⁷⁹

Traveling Teachers

As word spread about United throughout India, organizations and training centers in other states contacted United and asked it to send teachers to them to teach their deaf students. As there were no other training programs providing the same kind of bilingual education, United was filling an essential need. In 2008, United sent two teachers to Bangalore and one to Coimbatore for six months. These three teachers were in their early twenties and had recently completed the A level course. United’s former director selected them as a result of their commitment to teaching and the fact that they were perceived to be responsible and motivated. I was able to spend time with both of the Bangalore based teachers as one was stationed at the Disabled Peoples Association (DPA) where I conducted fieldwork and another was placed at an institute for speech and hearing not far from DPA. Both of these teachers taught the A level class through daily classes to small groups of young adults who paid a modest fee for the course. For both of these teachers it was their first time away from home and their first experience as official teachers.

Deaf students in Bangalore had previously not had much exposure to deaf teachers or awareness of the United model of training deaf teachers.¹⁸⁰ As such, the presence of these two teachers stirred up feelings of desire and hope in students at DPA who told me that they wanted to be like Shalini and Gaurav, the two teachers. DPA students told me that Shalini and Gaurav were helping them develop and that they in turn wanted to help other deaf people develop. They also told me that they were learning “deeply” from them as courses were in sign language and these courses then became a referent to which they compared the rest of the education that they were receiving at DPA. In experiencing other forms of deaf education, these students’ desires had taken a deaf turn as they were taught, and now realized, the value of having deaf teachers. Following their experiences in this course, many wanted to become teachers themselves. They therefore had new ideas for future careers and paths.

Gaurav and Shalini’s students were so enthusiastic about their courses that DPA asked the two they would stay on as permanent DPA employees. Both of them thought

¹⁷⁹ This tension between sharing and independence was similar to the tension found in deaf pyramid scheme dynamics between uplines and downlines. Downlines were supposed to copy uplines but they were also supposed to be independent.

¹⁸⁰ As I noted in Chapter Three, Chetan, a deaf government worker volunteered at DPA on Saturday mornings and DPA had a full time deaf teacher named Purnima. However, Chetan was a volunteer teacher and Purnima was perceived as not having much power. In contrast, the United teachers presented as strong, passionate, and independent. Their teaching practices, which were based on collaboration and sharing, were also different from those used by Chetan and Purnima.
about this offer for a while and felt conflicted by their competing desires of wanting to stay in Bangalore to teach and help deaf students develop and returning to Bombay where they could study further and develop themselves. After much thought, both decided that they would return to Bombay to enroll in the B level class and ultimately to attend the new B.A. program. They did promise to keep in touch with their students and perhaps to return to work at DPA in the future.\(^{181}\) Their initial indecision about whether to further develop themselves first or stay in Bangalore was similar to the negotiations discussed above between Ruma and her students in that there is recognition that all deafs, even deaf teachers, are on a path of learning. Sonali, who went to Coimbatore, had a similar experience and spoke of feeling attachment and responsibility for her students there. She told me that conditions were difficult because her lodging and food were not very good and she was not paid on time. Yet despite these hardships, she felt that she became more “independent and strong.” She said that she hoped in the future to travel elsewhere in India and teach again, perhaps to Dehra Dun or somewhere else in the north.\(^{182}\) Teaching provided these three deafs and others with an opportunity to travel to other Indian cities, learn about the lives of deaf people elsewhere, and to develop confidence in their abilities to be teachers.

While Gaurav, Shalini, and Sonali, and most others at United, are now committed to becoming deaf teachers, this was not always the case. Gaurav told me that he formerly wanted to work with computers and that he loved doing tally. He said that he was initially looking for jobs involving tally and that he planned to study tally at the level of higher education. However, a friend told him about and brought him to visit United. Upon visiting he decided that he “liked the way the organization is and how it is run” and he enrolled in A level courses. He then decided that he wanted to be a teacher after all. This is not an unusual story; most of United’s current teachers did not originally plan to become teachers and they earlier did not realize that such a thing was even possible. Brinda, an A level teacher who I mentioned, previously worked as a data entry operator. She said that the work was incredibly dull and that she “felt like a horse doing the same thing again and again.” In contrast to data entry, teaching felt more (literally) human and fulfilling. Brinda grew up speaking and did not know anything about sign language or other deaf people and then she met Ritu’s deaf uncle who introduced her to Ritu and other members of Ritu’s family who are also deaf.

Deaf Turns

While sitting with Brinda in a nook in the United office, she told me that she used to want to be normal and she felt bad that she was deaf. But then she met Ritu’s uncle and he taught her some sign language and introduced her to other deaf people. She said: “I learned that there is something called deaf culture and it is my own culture and there is something called sign language and it is my language.” Brinda said that United feels like

\(^{181}\) It should be noted that both Shalini and Gaurav had concerns about DPA and felt that it was not a very deaf centered space and that deaf students were not educated properly in sign language there.

\(^{182}\) Shalini and Sonali’s parents were both reluctant to permit their daughters to travel from Bombay. However, Suresh, United’s manager and a master teacher, went to both of their homes and convinced their families to let them attend. He said that he spoke to the parents about the importance of development and he told them that this experience would give their daughters an opportunity to develop further. Shalini was able to travel by train with Gaurav to Bangalore. Since Sonali was traveling alone, her father took the train with her to Coimbatore and returned at the end of her time to pick her up.
a family and that she looks forward to going to the office and to its Sunday club where
she learns news and socializes with other deafs. As Brinda’s family is extremely
protective of her as the youngest and only deaf daughter, she told me that she had to
engage in a hunger strike in order to persuade her parents to let her attend the yearly
United deaf camp which was held in Dehra Dun, a 16 hour train ride away. However, she
says that as much as she wants to attend the B.A. program, her family told her that she
could not as it was too far away and they were prepared to admit her to the hospital if she
tried to fast again in protest. Brinda ruefully told me this and said that although her father
attended the B.A. program information session held at United, she was not holding her
breath. Brinda’s involvement within the deaf world of United resulted in some
contestation with her family. She contends that her family’s (over) protectiveness have
made her unable to develop as much as she might like to as a deaf teacher and potential
deaf B.A. program student. However it is clear that participation within United has made
Brinda more aware of other possibilities and ways of living in the world involving both
the use of sign language and teaching: she has taken a deaf turn.

Similarly, Ravi, a current teacher in the B.A. program who formerly taught at
United, told me that while he was growing up he did not use sign language at all. It was
only after his parents took him from his home city of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh to the
NIHH in Bombay, that he started learning sign language. His parents brought him to the
NIHH in search of better hearing aids although instead of getting these they returned with
an understanding of “sign language as deaf peoples’ mother tongue” after encountering
the NIH’s ISL Cell. Shortly after returning to Lucknow, Ravi again traveled to
Bombay, this time to stay and study sign language. He then became a sign language
teacher after completing NIH’s basic sign language courses. When United started in
2006, he became a teacher there and now he wants to continue teaching.

I asked Ravi what he had wanted to do before he learned sign language and he
responded: “When growing up, I always saw deaf people working as servants and
working in railway offices and banks. Even with a B.A, a deaf person will be a servant. I
wanted to be an engineer or a computer graphic designer but then I learned about sign
language and teaching and so I decided that I wanted to do this.” Previously Ravi could
only imagine himself as a servant (even if he did study for a B.A. degree); now he is a
teacher. For Ravi and others who are either currently deaf teachers or hoping to become
one, teaching allows one to be situated at the higher end of deaf hierarchies and provides
one with status in relation to other deaf people- because they are sharing or imparting
information instead of receiving it. For Ravi, like many other deafs, the possibility of
becoming a teacher meant that other kinds of futures were possible.\(^{184}\)

\(^{183}\) Brinda’s conflicts with her parents over her desire for independence were not unique and most of the
young women who were ultimately permitted to attend the B.A. program had similar stories of
confrontation. Families were concerned that their daughters would be too old marry once they finished the
B.A. program. They were also concerned about how safe their daughters would be in Delhi and what kinds
of chaperoning/oversight there would be. Atul tried to alleviate these fears by telling families that he would
personally look after the female students and that his wife would also supervise them. He made the point
that their daughters would be more marriage eligible after earning a degree.

\(^{184}\) I must note that just as deaf workers are tracked into doing BPO or DEO work (as discussed in Chapter
Four), deaf people are often also tracked into teaching or social service careers. Deaf teachers are yet
another kind of “deaf group.”
Ravi’s transformation began when he encountered the NIHH’s newly opened ISL Cell. This cell started in 2001 when Madan Vasishta, a deaf Indian with a Ph.D. from Gallaudet University, spent a month at NIHH conducting lectures on the use of sign language in deaf education. The current director at the time was sympathetic and asked Vasishta to develop a proposal for ISL classes and an interpreter training program. Included too in the proposal were the beginnings of a sign language curriculum and educational materials. Materials built upon the sign language research that Vasishta had been conducting in India with two American linguists, James Woodward and Kirk Wilson since the 1970s. This research had culminated in a sign language dictionary and several articles published on Indian Sign Language in which the authors concluded that ISL was a language “in its own right and indigenous to the Indian subcontinent.” (Zeshan et al 2005, 18). Vasishta’s proposal to the NIHH also utilized the linguistic research on Indian Sign Language that Sigrid Helmreich, a German linguist, had conducted in India for her Masters level research in the 1990’s.

The proposal for the new cell was approved and in 2001, the NIHH’s ISL cell was officially launched with a coordinator, a deaf university graduate (Atul Deshmukh) as the first teacher, and two researchers/consultants (ibid, 19). Since then, the cell has been expanding and in addition to basic sign language courses and interpreter training, it has also developed sign language teaching training courses, English courses for deaf students, and materials such as books and videos for teaching ISL. The cell has replicated itself at the other NIHH sites in Delhi, Calcutta, Hyderabad, and Orissa although Bombay remains its hub. While beginning and intermediate courses are offered at the other NIHH sites, interested students must travel to Bombay in order to receive advanced level sign language training.

In an article about the use of ISL in educational settings, Ulrike Zeshan, Madan Vasishta, and Meher Sethna discuss the success of the ISL cell and the impact that it has had on both deaf teachers and teacher trainees and they conclude:

“The effect of the training on deaf people who participate in the course can only be described as dramatic. Usually deaf Indians do not believe that their sign language is a “proper language” that has a grammar of its own. They think of signing as being some way of communicating that is inferior to spoken language...Through the training programme, they learn that this is not true, and this awareness, together with the new confidence that they gain through the programme, has a deep effect on their sense of identity and self-esteem...All deaf teacher trainees, even those who do not pass the exams, also get a new sense of what deaf people in general, and they themselves as individuals can achieve and this motivates them to pursue goals that they would have thought to be out of reach earlier” (Zeshan et al. 2005, 28).

The authors go on to state that as a result of participation within the sign language teaching program, deaf young adults have come to realize that other futures are possible for themselves. Two earlier studies, which Zeshan et al. refer to, had shown that when

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185 Gallaudet University is the world’s oldest liberal arts university for the deaf and it was established in 1864. It is a private university with a budget mostly provided by the American federal government.
186 These courses are not only for deaf people and there is usually a mixture of deaf and normal students.
asked about appropriate careers for deaf people, parents of the deaf, deaf students, and teachers of the deaf all stated that they thought that employment such as tailoring, printing, carpentry, fine art, computerized data entry, and typing would be appropriate. Teaching was never mentioned as a possible career option and as such, participation within the ISL cell has created new ideas of possible careers for deaf young adults. Similarly, Zeshan et al. give examples of older students who had been out of school for many years who, after participating in the sign language cell, returned to pursue either their SSLC or a pre-university course (ibid, 30). Learning sign language well created conditions of possibility for learning other things well as deaf people came to realize that they possessed skills and knowledge which they did not previously realize had value. In addition, participating in the cell provided deaf learners with access to an institutionalized deaf sociality and opportunities to participate within deaf networks. Students enrolled in courses spent time together before or after classes and there are also a steady stream of international and Indian (deaf and normal) visitors who come to visit the cell. Therefore, learning sign language at the NIHH creates new senses of self, identity, and potential careers.

Deafs come from all over India to Bombay to enroll in the advanced sign language course and the sign language teacher training program. Being employed by the NIHH as a sign language teacher is a coveted position towards which many aspired as it is a government job which therefore pays quite decently and offers opportunities to travel to other NIHH sites around the country and teach there. Teachers are often required to travel to another NIHH site for a period of six months to a year to teach courses and thus have mobility that other deaf young adults may not have. As teachers, they are looked up to and respected and they are often able to situate themselves within deaf networks in the city that they travel to. However, while the NIHH provides deafs with training and employment opportunities, it is important to note that it is not a deaf utopia.

While the ISL cell has trained many deaf and normal people in ISL, it is not without criticism by both those involved with it and others who choose not to work with it (such as the nexus of organizations discussed in the previous chapter). Many contend that sign language is not valued and that it is marginalized within the NIHH where the vast majority of funding goes to audiology, speech training, and oral based education and programming. Within the NIHH’s deaf education degree and diploma programs, students studying to become deaf education teachers have not been required to study sign language and deaf people have not been permitted to either teach or be students in these programs. There are also many people who are frustrated by the fact that teachers within the NIHH English classes for deaf students are not encouraged to use sign language. This is why the cell’s first deaf teacher and its coordinator decided to start the United Foundation; they wanted to create a program that would be entirely based on sign language-centered bilingual educational methods. They felt that sign language needed to be privileged and that deaf teachers were needed. As such their efforts represented a different model from the clinical setting of NIHH where deaf students and teachers were a tiny minority.

What is at Stake in this New B.A. Program?

187 Being a traveling deaf teacher offers freedom and opportunities to travel that are similar to those experienced by traveling deaf preachers as discussed in Chapter Five.
Now I turn to the actual B.A. program that I have spent so much time foregrounding. The University of the Highlands in the United Kingdom has an international center called the Institute for Deaf Studies (IDS). Deaf students from all over the world enroll in IDS to conduct sign language research and study deaf culture and deaf community development for varying lengths of time (depending on funding and whether or not a degree is to be granted). For IDS’ director, Sigrid Helmreich, deaf development and sign language development go hand in hand. Conducting sign language research is a means to ultimately creating a sign language corpus which can be used for education as well as establishing deaf community legitimacy. IDS has hubs in India, Turkey, Uganda, and Ghana. Students and community based outreach and educational workers from these countries come to University of the Highlands to conduct linguistic and educational research and create sign language DVDs using a model already established in India. IDS is an academic center where students conduct research on different sign languages and a resource center for creating sign language tools such as DVDs and books.

IDS also works closely with the Deaf Education Foundation (DEF), which Helmreich also helped to found in the early 2000’s. DEF is an NGO focused on improving educational access for deaf people in developing countries with the explicit aim of setting up a university. Both DEF and IDS’s administrators (who are more or less the same people) had hoped for many years to start a university for deaf students from developing countries. The B.A. program in Applied Sign Language Studies in New Delhi is the culmination of these efforts. Helmreich told me that the B.A. program is supposed to be international in scope and that India was chosen as its location as a result of its good technology infrastructure, large numbers of deaf people, and the fact that it is still inexpensive. The B.A. program’s focus is applied sign language linguistics in order to create a new cadre of literate deaf people who can become deaf teachers although it is possible that there will be other academic subjects and paths in later years.

India is marketed as a space of opportunity for both deaf linguistic research and educational development. In an IDS promotional publication from 2008, the situation of deaf people in both the U.K. and India is compared. The publication states that as a result of medical intervention (cochlear implants), deaf schools in the U.K. are increasingly closing and there are fewer opportunities in the U.K. for both teachers and researchers interested in working with deaf students and populations. However, and in contrast, India has many deaf people, few good quality deaf schools, and little linguistic research has been conducted there. In this way, India has become a space of potential deaf development where international researchers and students can congregate and develop both themselves and other deafs. It has also become a space of international deaf intervention in the name of deaf development as specific ideas of deaf rights, empowerment, and leadership are espoused (also see Friedner 2008).

The B.A. program is a joint program of IDS and the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in Delhi which is most widely known for its correspondence and

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188 What is particularly interesting about this is the resulting debates over what modality of communication should be used in the program-- International Sign or Indian Sign Language? Should African students be expected to learn Indian Sign Language? The first batch was conducted in ISL (although it has been reported that this ISL is different from ISL elsewhere in Delhi as students mix elements of International Sign with ISL) and the international students have learned ISL through socializing and interacting. However, the second batch may have more international students than Indian students and so it is not clear which sign language will be used.
distance education classes. As IGNOU’s mission is to reach underserved and undereducated Indians through innovative means such as distance education, the administration was interested in collaborating on the B.A. program when approached by IDS. Students who receive a B.A. will receive two degrees: one from IGNOU and one from the University of the Highlands. One of the program’s top selling points was that students will receive a B.A. from the U.K. at an Indian price. During orientation and information sessions and on DVDs disseminated as an information packet in sign language, this point was stressed again and again. Potential students were also told that after graduating from the program, they would have the opportunity to travel to the U.K. or to the U.S. to pursue a masters degree if they wanted or they would be able to get jobs as sign language teachers. The future for deaf graduates of this program, according to Atul, was bright. As he stated in the 2009 DVD course packet (or electronic brochure) which was distributed to promote the B.A. program:

“After you finish, what will the benefit be? There will be good benefits. You can become a teacher. This is not a government accredited program so government schools will not accept you as a teacher. But you can work as a teachers assistant to normal teachers where you can help them communicate with the students and teach. You can also teach interpreters. Now there are teachers for interpreters but they only have technical skills and not a B.A. You will have a B.A. and know more. You can teach sign language to people and children, not interpreters. You can fly elsewhere, to the U.K., to Europe, to America, to study for an MA or a PhD. You will be equal to hearing” (2009 Sign Language Course Information Packet DVD, translated by Friedner).

Atul explained in the information sessions that he conducted in person and on this DVD that the B.A. program was a four year program and year zero was to be a foundation course in which students were to improve their English and sign language skills in addition to learning about computers and personal development. Upon successful completion of year zero, students could formally enter the B.A. program where they would learn, methodologically and ethnically, to conduct sign language research and give presentations on this research. They would be assigned internships in deaf schools and they would have projects based on these internships. Teachers and lecturers would be flown in from all over the world and there would also be an on-line distance education component which would be developed in the U.K. And as I noted in the introduction of this chapter, evaluation would take place according to U.K. standards:

“Here the Indian way of learning is different. For an exam, you write for many hours. You read the material, memorize it, and then put it onto the paper. This is the wrong way. In the U.K. way, you write your own ideas. You can write or sign. You can film yourself signing and then give a CD to your teacher who will watch and evaluate you. But it has to be the same quality as normals. Normals can write so deaf can sign; this is equal. Maybe in this way you will learn more“ (2009 Sign Language Course Information Packet DVD, translated by Friedner).
As Atul noted, deafs can sign their exams and provide their instructors with a DVD recording. This test taking methodology will result in their being equal to hearing students who can easily write (deaf people cannot as they have not had the same educational opportunities). By signing their exams they will be able to show their teachers what they know in a language that is accessible to them; they will be able to show their strengths.

The emphasis on deaf people as equal to normals is a recurring theme throughout advertising and recruitment for the B.A. program and it represents the emergence of a very explicit idea of deaf capability and pride. This emphasis also functions as a means of critiquing the current and past status quo in India in which deafs have not been considered equal to normals and in which there have been no deaf run or representative educational institutions. The B.A. program recruitment materials constantly stressed the fact that deafs can be equal to normals and that they can succeed-- especially when appropriate structures of education are provided (in sign language). In addition to creating new deaf futures as professional deaf educators and setting up deaf institutions, this focus on deafs being equal to normals was what was at stake in this program.\textsuperscript{189}

\textbf{Excitement and Ambivalence}

In the spring of 2009 there was much excitement about the B.A. program among those who knew about it. Those involved with United had watched the plans for the program develop and they had initially been disappointed when earlier plans fell through in 2007 to establish a similar B.A. program in Maharashtra, in a location not far from Bombay. Yet the 2009 plans were concrete and contracts had been signed between the University of the Highlands and IGNOU.\textsuperscript{190} The program had a course packet with information about the program, an application, and a syllabus. In the spring of 2009, Atul traveled quickly around India conducting information sessions at deaf schools and clubs. In addition, the DVD course packet was distributed widely throughout deaf networks. In the DVD, Atul looked distinguished in a velvet blazer and he outlined the course and what it entailed. I would like to again quote from this DVD in order to make some points about the new kinds of order that the B.A. program was instituting. After introducing the concept of a DVD informational video (as this was a new concept for most deaf Indians), Atul went on to provide some basic administrative information about program deadlines and starting dates. He was quick to state:

\begin{quote}
“Watch this video but it is possible that in one month, two months, three months, the news will change, so be careful. Now, see the general information about the program (will stay the same) but maybe the dates, fees, or phone numbers will change. So be careful. Contact people and ask for news. Stay in touch and ask for
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{189} The network of organizations discussed in the previous chapter also focused on deafs and normals being equal although these organizations focused more explicitly on engaging in contentious politics in pursuit of deaf rights. The B.A. program was more focused on education and establishing educational structures.

\textsuperscript{190} This is not to say that there was not some skepticism remaining about whether or not the program would actually be launched. Deafs in Bangalore often asked me if I had seen “proof” of the program or pictures of the actual buildings where classes would be held. As a result of seeing many previous schemes (including the pyramid schemes discussed in Chapter Six) fail, deafs tended to be skeptical about new developments and programs promising better deaf futures.

In admonishing viewers and potential applicants to “be careful” in requesting news, the responsibility for learning new information was shifted onto the individual potential applicant as opposed to the collective deaf group. It is the individual applicants’ responsibility to find out what is new or different and she must be aggressive in seeking out news. This admonition to “be careful” represents a departure from usual ways of sharing knowledge and news in which deafs are morally obligated to share news with each other. Instead, deafs are supposed to individually seek out news. They are responsible for learning if there are changes, and if there are, they are responsible for learning what these changes are. Here the tension between sharing and independence is foregrounded.

Along with stressing the importance of responsibility, Atul stressed the theme of independence. Atul stated that there would not be hostel accommodations available and that students would either rent shared rooms together or live with a local family. They would be responsible for their own accommodation and food. This focus on independence made both potential students and their families nervous although Atul attempted to mitigate peoples’ fears by stressing, almost paradoxically, the fact that the students would all be sharing: they would share accommodations and cooking responsibilities and they would also pool scholarship money. This is yet another fault line in the tension between sharing and independence. In addition, as I will discuss, this focus on independence was a departure from the United way of doing things which was through sharing.

Atul himself very much embodied these tensions in his own biography. He ran away from home as a teenager after his parents refused to permit him to study further because of his late-onset deafness. He made his way to Delhi from rural West Bengal and became a teacher at the Delhi Foundation of Deaf Women where he ultimately met Sigrid Helmreich when she was conducting her M.A. research and he became her research assistant. Atul was determined to pursue higher education and he did this first through correspondence classes and then traveling to Australia, the Netherlands, and the U.K. where he is now studying for his Ph.D. He spends much time away from his wife and young daughter and presents himself as a self-made fiercely independent man with a great deal of responsibility over running the new B.A. program (which he sometimes seems reluctant to share and delegate). He is prone to delivering both inspirational speeches about deaf development and ones in which he threatens to fail students. He plays many roles for the B.A. students: he is their teacher, their friend, and a mentor. He is simultaneously accessible and inaccessible to them. His office is always open but he is often not there as he travels a great deal. He is a difficult model for other deafs to follow as most have not left home at the age of fifteen and are unsuccessful at reconciling desire for deaf development with family obligations-- as was clear in Brinda’s case as discussed earlier.

**The Very First Students and Anxieties over Sharing Space**

On a very hot day in September I arranged to meet a group of the year zero students in central Delhi. I had met quite a few of the students earlier in Bombay and I
also knew Shalini from Bangalore where she had taught for six months the previous fall and winter. I recognized some of the other students as teachers from United’s program in Bombay and from various training centers in Delhi. We joked about how nice it was for them to go from being teachers to students and how they could now relax and behave badly with their teachers although they earnestly said they would not dare to do this. We went for an inexpensive lunch of rice and sambar at an Keralan cafeteria across from the central train and we chatted about the transition to Delhi and how the students were adjusting.

The students were all living in shared flats on the far eastern outskirts of the city—a place where the city is still being built and where their apartment complex was surrounded by fields and construction sites. Moving around the city was a source of concern and frustration because it took so long to commute to their classes (almost three hours each way) and they were also negotiating living with other students in the program who were very different from them. In October they were supposed to move to apartments closer to their classes and until then they were struggling with doing their school work, the grueling commute (on crowded buses, mini-buses, and the expensive new metro), preparing food, and getting along with each other.

On a Sunday afternoon I visited the flat where five of the young women lived. When I arrived, two of the young women from Delhi were out with their families and so I sat and chatted with Shalini and with Ruma, the latter whom I had met in Bombay. They were eager to talk to me and learn news because they had been isolated in their apartment complex without television, internet, or newspapers. Their only source of news was each other, their mobile phones, and now me. And so Shalini and Ruma sat me down, wielded a fake remote control, and then turned me on as if I were a television set, demanding that I give them news. I did not have very much to tell them although I did tell them about my activities over the past few days and then we moved on to talking about the new B.A. program.

Shalini and Ruma were excited to be in the B.A. program although they said that they still did not know what was going to happen, who their teachers were going to be in subsequent years, and what it all meant for their future—but they told me that they were proud of being in the first batch as they “are the famous ones. Future batches no one will care about but because we are the first ones the newspapers are interested.” (And there were newspaper articles about the program in major Indian newspapers.) In this sense, they and the other B.A. program students are pioneers trying to develop themselves and chart new deaf futures. Both Shalini and Ruma strongly wanted to be teachers and they saw the B.A. program as a step in that direction. Yet they were unhappy because there was trouble in their flat between them and their flatmates.

When I asked Shalini and Ruma about why they were having problems, they told me that they were both very independent, that Shalini had experience living alone in

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191 These Delhi-based teachers had quit their jobs to attend the B.A. program and the administrator of the training center where they had worked was upset about this because she said that they had paying jobs and so why did they need to return to school? Furthermore as a few of these brand new students were already in their late twenties, what if they could not find jobs after finishing the B.A. program? This administrator was voicing concern about the uncertain futures that awaited graduates of this program. However, and in contrast, these former teachers turned students were very excited about the opportunity to pursue higher education.

192 This was also called the girls flat. “Girls” here is interchangeable with young women and female.
Bangalore, and that they were experienced cooks and knew how to run a household. However, the other three flatmates were much younger and had not had experience on their own. Shalini and Ruma said that the other girls were pampered at home and so they expected Shalini and Ruma to pamper them too. They were frustrated with constantly being asked for food or milk and by the fact that the other girls did not share the housework. But this was not the main source of tension.

According to Shalini and Ruma, two of their roommates attended the Delhi Deaf Brothers and Sisters’ Club (“church”) and were members of the church. On the weekends, they went out with deaf friends from the church and during B.A. program classes they socialized only with each other and with young men from Delhi who also attended the church. Shalini and Ruma told me that they were worried about living with Josie and Maya, their church going roommates, because they felt that they could become spoiled from sharing space with them and that Josie and Maya would influence them negatively.

Independence, Brain Washing, and Sign Butter

When I pressed Shalini and Ruma on how exactly sharing space might affect them negatively, they were unable to articulate their thoughts. They said that they were worried about what they saw as the dubious morality of these girls rubbing off on them and they told me multiple times that they needed to “be careful.” Such close physical proximity and sharing everyday routines meant that there would be increased risk of being “spoiled.” As it was, Shalini and Ruma knew that they were in a new space with new people and were perhaps more susceptible or vulnerable to “sign butter,” in which the use of sign language creates conditions of possibility for things not ordinarily possible and which could create a turn towards the wrong direction (see Chapter Five for more on sign butter). The influence that deaf people held over each other through their mutual orientations and shared use of sign language created heightened concern about being “spoiled.”

Indeed, Shalini and Ruma became so frustrated and concerned after a few weeks that they asked Atul to find a small apartment for just the two of them. In response, Atul refused and said that it was safer to have all of the girls living together in one location (although Atul was thinking of a different kind of safety than that which Shalini and Ruma were concerned about). He also said that he would talk to the other two girls about the importance of integrating themselves into the program and that he would warn them about attending church. After many tense discussions, the young women decided to stay together and relations have improved. Shalini and Ruma are still concerned about the fact that Josie and Maya continue to go to church although they have “adjusted” because they are together almost all the time and have had to engage in sameness work.

In conversations with me, Atul made it quite clear that he did not think that attending the B.A. program and attending the Delhi Deaf Brothers and Sisters Club could be done in tandem as he viewed the clubs as places where brainwashing happened and where attendees are robbed of independent thought. He told me that church attendees merely follow the leaders and they do not think for themselves. Church-goers are also compelled to constantly witness and teach others about what they are learning in church. He saw this as being harmful for the B.A. program because he was trying to promote independent thought and a different idea of deaf development-- which he argued was
based on critical thought and analysis. At stake here was not just whether or not B.A. students attended church but what kinds of deaf people they were. It was Atul’s goal to create free thinking and independent students and he viewed attending church at the hierarchical Delhi Deaf Brothers and Sisters Club as incompatible with this goal.  

Atul hoped to grow a series of organizations around the B.A. program including a Delhi based United Foundation office where students in the B.A. program could teach English to deafs living in Delhi, a mental health counseling center which would focus on meeting the emotional and psychological needs of deaf sign language users, and ultimately deaf schools as well. All of these organizations would be dedicated to a vision of valuing deaf people as possessing their own language and culture and promoting independent thought and learning in deaf people. Atul said that he was not interested in working with either the Pan Indian Deaf League (PIDL) or the National Indian Deaf Association (NIDA). He viewed both as power hungry and uninterested in improving deaf futures. He felt strongly that they were not interested in creating strong and independent deaf youth and he said that PIDL was too passive and NIDA was based upon church-going and brainwashing. As such, Atul was hoping to create his own nexus of organizations, which would be created to develop and instill what he called “deaf culture” in participants. For Atul, “deaf culture” was based on an idea of deaf capability and pride and it sometimes articulated with what he called “Indian culture” while other times it departed from it (as with his stress on independence).

“Deaf Culture” Talk

Here I want to turn to the concept of “deaf culture” as the students in the B.A. program (both following in Atul’s footsteps and departing from them) spent much time experimenting with this concept in their efforts to both define it and establish a “deaf culture” for their program that could encompass the diversity of deaf experiences in the program. They felt that their new educational structure needed to have a culture. Discussions about “deaf culture” were plentiful among the year zero students. There were four international students in addition to the twenty plus students from India in this first batch and they were all young men from China, Nepal, Burundi, and Uganda. As I did not spend time in the male students’ flats, I did not have access to what relationships were like between students from diverse backgrounds in living spaces. However I saw that in classrooms and social spaces there were often negotiations over what was understood to be “deaf culture” in both its universal and specific forms. Indian students told me that there had been some tense interactions with their Chinese classmate as he did not like to be disturbed when he was on his computer. I was told that it was impolite in “Chinese deaf culture” to interrupt someone when working on their computer. Similarly, one day I sat in the program’s administration office socializing with students after classes (this was one of the few air conditioned spaces and despite the fact that it was the administration office, Atul invited students to sit and chat with each other and with him if he happened to be there). I was having a conversation with a student from Bombay and the sole Nepali student walked between us and interrupted our conversation by saying “excuse me.” I told him that he did not have to say “excuse me” as it would have been much less disruptive had he just walked straight through without stopping. He replied “It

193 Atul was not necessarily concerned about all churches but rather the network of the National Indian Deaf Association, the Delhi Deaf Brothers and Sisters Club, and the Deaf Empowerment Training Center.
is American deaf culture to say excuse me and so I am trying to respect American deaf culture”. I responded that it really was not “American deaf culture” to say “excuse me” (and that in fact it was the opposite in that one was supposed to quickly walk through and not interrupt). After this exchange everyone in the room engaged in a lengthy conversation about what “deaf culture” was.

The students were unable to define “deaf culture” but they all agreed that “deaf culture” was important to them and to other deaf people and that it conditioned their ways of acting and being in the world. Students told me that normal people should learn sign language in order to show respect for “deaf culture” and deaf people should be allowed to sit down on buses and trains that are crowded so that they can sign with each other instead of having to hold onto railings with hands and arms. These steps would show respect for and permit “deaf culture” to proliferate. Sharing ideas and thoughts with other deaf people was considered part of “deaf culture” as was learning about deaf development efforts around the world. In addition, most students were adamant in pointing out, when I asked them about other social or political issues happening in India, that they were only aware of and invested in “deaf culture.” For example, in an interaction with a student in which I referenced the small child laborer who had served us lunch and asked him how he felt about child labor, he replied that he “only knew about deaf culture. Other people can know about other cultures. I know about deaf culture only. It is my culture.”

In some ways these students are having similar debates and discussions to those that deaf rights activists held in the United States in the 1980’s, especially around the time of the 1988 Deaf President Now (DPN) protests in which thousands of Gallaudet University students took to the streets of Washington, D.C. in order to demand that the Gallaudet Board of Trustees appoint a deaf president. As part of these protests, students positioned themselves as a linguistic minority and represented themselves as members and bearers of deaf culture. Deaf culture has often been a rallying cry and unifying theme of deaf cultural politics in the United States and elsewhere (Shapiro 1993, Padden and Humphries 1988, Moore and Levitan 2003, Bechter 2009). However, in India there is no state recognition of a deaf cultural identity or sign language as an official language. The ways that the B.A. program students discussed and debated deaf culture did not result in the emergence of contentious politics against the state (or at least not yet). And so what happens when “deaf culture” becomes an ends in and of itself and a topic of many daily conversations?

What is important to think about here is the way in which “the language of rights is articulated as a way of expressing one’s freedom from one’s local cultural identity.” (Rabinow 2003 as cited in Chatterji and Mehta 2007, 170). What I mean by this is that focusing on deaf culture, analogous to the concept of rights, did at least two things in this new pedagogical space: it created a pan-Indian and universal “deaf culture” that focused on commonalities across what could perhaps be seen as different deaf experiences (the rural Ugandan student has had a different set of life experiences than those of the urban Chinese student) and it produced a space where deaf development as a value is foregrounded. These students passionately talked about “deaf culture” and they referenced it as both something that needed to be respected and protected (e.g., normal people should learn sign language and there should be deaf teachers and researchers) and something that needed to be further developed (through sign language research, deaf
mime and theater, deaf focused and run institutions, and through training deaf teachers). Talking about “deaf culture” therefore served as a form of sameness work and it created a denser sense of “deaf deaf same” and deaf sociality, regardless of where students were from.

“Equal” Deaf Development

Inspiring to me was the fact that there was a strong attempt by Atul to promote a sense of “equal” deaf development. In December 2009, an international sign language and deaf studies conference sponsored by IDS and DEF was held at IGNOU. Participants from all over the world attended-- from the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, the United States, Nepal, and elsewhere. Participants attended lectures and workshops on sign language research, deaf empowerment, the ethics of conducting research amongst developing deaf populations, and performances and skits. For many of the year zero students this was the first time that they had attended an international conference. They spoke about wanting to attend again in 2011 when the same conference would probably be held in South Africa perhaps in coordination with the World Federation of the Deaf’s (WFD) World Congress meetings. 194

In a short meeting held at the end of a day of classes in January 2010, Atul spoke to the students of the importance of the opportunity to fly to other places for deaf conferences. “Why should only foreign researchers come here? We should go to other places to show that we are equal,” he said. After this statement, the students went around the room and one by one declared that they too wanted to go to South Africa for “deaf development” and “learning more about deaf culture.” Some of the students also expressed a desire to “give a presentation or lecture about deaf issues in India” therefore positioning themselves as being capable of contributing knowledge and expertise. There was a sense that deaf development was a global project and the students in this new B.A. course were, through participating in international conferences and meeting visiting deaf researchers and lecturers, learning about international structures of deaf development. Many of them hoped to be involved in the trenches of such deaf development and in creating representations of deaf Indian life. It was important for students in the B.A. program to not only feel equal to normals but also to deaf people living in other countries, especially developed countries such as America and the U.K., as well.

This is not to say that there was no hierarchy within the B.A. program. As I hope I have made clear, Atul is a dominant figure with strong positions who looms large. Students (sometimes ambivalently) modeled themselves after him and saw him as an example of a developed deaf person. In addition, students arranged themselves into informal and formal hierarchies based often on sign language ability and years spent teaching before joining the program. They often competed with each other over who knew the most appropriate sign for an English word. Each B.A. program course also had a course leader who was elected by the other students and this course leader had better access to Atul and other teachers. Course leaders also gave orders and granted permission for leaving classes early when Atul and other administrators could not be reached. Students did not complain about this hierarchy or find it off-putting; they told me that it

194 Unfortunately the registration fee for the WFD international congress is prohibitive-- $400.00 is the reduced rate for members from developing countries-- and most deaf people from developing countries cannot afford to go.
was needed and helpful as “otherwise Atul would be constantly answering our questions. Better to have one person who is responsible.” “Sharing” knowledge, resources, and information was not seen as incompatible with hierarchy.195

Grammar versus Development

While the sociality that occurred was extremely fulfilling for the program’s students, course work was often less than satisfying. Students had approximately two hours of English class a day and this was taught by a normal woman who was a former principal of an oral deaf school in North India. While this teacher, Kajal, had a Ph.D. in deaf education, she was a poor signer and students complained that they could not understand her “deeply.” Students often complained about Kajal to Atul and said that they needed a teacher who was a better communicator in sign language. Atul’s response was always that such a teacher could not be found in India. Students also complained that Kajal did not respect “deaf culture” and that she spoke over them and was paternalistic.196 This inability to understand Kajal was compounded by the fact that the subject matter—English grammar—was extremely difficult and opaque for adult learners without a solid foundation in any written grammatical structure. The classroom was a site of constant motion as students signed furiously with each other in consultations about parts of the lesson that was confusing. The classroom often felt like a purgatory of sorts with students sitting with anxious expressions on their faces trying to understand the litany of English grammar rules. Is this really what they had come to Delhi to learn?

After two hours of class with Kajal, the students went to a computer lab where they completed worksheets that Kajal had emailed them, conducted internet based English and grammar practice, and chatted with friends online. The internet based English and grammar exercises were created at University of the Highlands and mostly featured Atul signing new words, concepts, and grammar rules. There was occasionally an afternoon class or workshop after the scheduled computer lab time but usually the students were told to study “on their own” and “by themselves” which was a source of tension and frustration for most of the students. Students told me that they preferred to “share” and they did not understand why they were being told to do everything “self self self.” For the students, being told to do things on their own, without sharing with other students or the guidance of Atul or Kajal, was a form of rejection and lack of care. I was told by students that they had grown up in schools “sharing with each other as we did not understand the teacher” and so this focus on individual learning was not very palatable to them. They told me that doing things on their own was against their previously learned patterns of collectively experiencing education. In addition, many of the students reported that they found it difficult to follow the internet based lessons and that it was isolating to

195 As I have discussed elsewhere in this dissertation hierarchy is very much a part of the fabric of deaf life and does not unsettle or prevent deaf development (and see Green 2008b).
196 At one point in the beginning of the year, the students had a meeting with IGNOU’s chancellor. He asked them what they needed from IGNOU and, communicating through an interpreter, they collectively asked for five or six laptops that they could all share and use for their homework assignments. Kajal happened to be at the meeting too and she turned to the chancellor and told him: “No, they do not need laptops, just provide them with five or six office computers which we can set up in the program office.” The students were furious that Kajal interrupted and saw this as an affront to their needs and desires. For her part, Kajal remained oblivious to the blunder that she had committed. After all, she had a Ph.D. and was a former principal with more authority than the students. It was this attitude that the students resented.
sit alone at a computer and stare at Atul signing monologues. As mentioned earlier, there was much tension between the values of independence, or doing things and finding things out on one’s own, and sharing, or pooling resources or knowledge. This is also similar to the tension that I discussed earlier in the informational video about the program in which Atul told the students that they would need to find housing and food by themselves.

There was also tension and contestation (as well as a bit of disappointment too) around the actual substance of what was being learned in the B.A. program. In January of 2010 I spoke with some students from Bombay who had gone home for a holiday. They told me that when they were home, deaf friends wanted “news” about the B.A. program. They wanted to know whether it was “good or bad.” These students told me that they did not know how to respond to their friends’ requests for information. According to one student: “Deafs in Bombay want deep deaf news and not information about learning English, grammar, and fingerspelling (at this point he imitated Kajal’s signing). Deafs want news about deaf culture and how deaf develop.” This student and other students have felt disappointed with the B.A. program because they feel that they are spending too much time on English and grammar with a teacher who does not know how to sign properly and this is not what they want to learn nor does this match their definition of “deep” deaf development. However, Atul constantly reminds them that they are only in year zero now and have not officially started the B.A. program and so they must be patient. The students’ experience of needing to be patient is similar to other deaf experiences involving patience discussed throughout this dissertation. In this case, deafs are being told that in the future they will actually learn something and they will be able to be deaf teachers. In the meantime, they must be patient and learn English from Kajal.

**A New Promotional Video/A New Deaf World**

In 2010 a new promotional video for the B.A. program was produced to recruit students for the second batch. In this video, the multi-ethnic group of deaf students streams in front of the camera lens smiling and waving. The students look confident and exuberant, like deaf people who are going places (and indeed they are walking off towards class). The IGNOU campus looks pastoral and quiet and the classrooms are modern conference rooms where students sit around tables. There is an interview with a current year zero student from Bombay as he sits perched on a set of stone stairs and he says:

“Hello, my name is Alvin and I am from Bombay. I heard about the B.A. program and thought to join. I am very proud as it is the first time that we have such a program in India in sign language development. For four years and after, I will develop and so will this program. In America there is Gallaudet University, we want the same thing here at IGNOU. Atul is a great lecturer, he is so interesting and explains well. I am so excited when I watch him lecture. We can understand him. A few days ago Suresh [another teacher in the B.A. program who is also studying for an MA from University of the Highlands] came by train from Bombay and he lectured to us about his past and how he developed and progressed. He told us about his passion for learning and how it is important to have an open mind and not close your mind” (2010 Sign Language Course Information Packet DVD, translated by Friedner).
Alvin’s comments are important for illustrating what is at stake in the new B.A. program: the emergence of new opportunities for deaf development through formal education that is deaf focused, the emergence of a sense of deaf pride and an awareness that deafs and normals can be equal, and the importance of desiring and being passionate about learning. A passion for learning here means being passionate for both independent thought and sharing, as well as desiring educational structures that foreground sign language usage. As I have argued throughout this chapter, this represents a new possible life project for deaf young adults. However, as I have also shown, for deaf young adults independent and shared are two overlapping and often contested ways of being in the world. Nothing can be purely independent within the fabric of deaf sociality and deaf development-- everything is shared and if it is not, as my informants constantly pointed out, there is often a desire for it to be so.

At the end of the new DVD, after Atul outlines the benefits and merits of the B.A. program, he states: “All are welcome. The whole world is welcome.” By inviting the world to India and proclaiming that India has something to offer deaf people, Atul is perhaps unsettling the narrative of India as deaf hell and the rest of the world as deaf heaven. Through the development of this B.A. program, India is being reinvented as a center for deaf development instead of the margins. The questions remain: Will Indian deaf schools accept deaf teachers? What will happen at the end of these four years? Will the B.A. program remain a bubble of talking about “deaf culture” or will structures of opportunity beyond this program emerge? And will India become an international deaf center?
Chapter Nine: Conclusion/Saved By Deafs or Normals?/On the Limits of Changing Space

On a cold winter afternoon in January 2010, I watched students at the Delhi Deaf Women’s League practice a mime performance that they would soon be presenting at a deaf cultural competition in Calcutta. Their only props were white gloves, which emphasized that their drama was narrated through mime, not sign language. Here is the plot: the tragic young heroine is waiting for a bus to take her home. As she waits, she is accosted by a man driving by in a car who rolls his window down and flirtatiously offers her a ride. She rebuffs him by telling him she is deaf. He drives off but then quickly returns and tells her that he loves deaf people and wants to marry a deaf girl. It is obvious to the audience that he is up to no good, but our heroine, reassured by his comments, gets into the car and goes off with him to a hotel room. Once they reach the hotel, he takes her to a room and pours her a drink. She becomes drunk and he closes the door to the room. He leads her to bed and she gently protests. They have sex and she falls asleep. He sneaks out and drives off looking very happy.

Our heroine wakes up in the morning, alone and abandoned, and slowly gets dressed. She does not know where to go. First she goes to the police station and says that her lover has run off. She is sent off when the normal officer realizes that she is deaf and cannot write. Then she goes to a pharmacist and tries to request an abortion pill. When the normal pharmacist sees that she is deaf, she tells her to wait and leaves for a moment— but she does not come back. Alone and still at the pharmacist, the girl sneaks a pill into her pocket. In despair, she stands by the side of a road and takes the pill. She immediately starts vomiting. A passerby rushes her to the hospital. And that is the end although all of the actors and choreographers then come on stage and sign: “We want more normal people to learn sign language. Please learn sign language to communicate with us so that we are not alone.”

Utterly entranced by this story, I watched it being rehearsed again and again. I argue that there are two ways to look at, or diagnose, this story. These two diagnoses are in tension with each other and they echo the tension that has permeated this dissertation from start to finish. This is the tension between deaf desires for deaf sociality and deaf development and their desires to participate within the larger normal world. On one hand, there is something exceptional about deaf sociality and deaf orientations towards each other. On the other hand, deafs also want opportunities that might be situated outside of deaf sociality and deaf development. Deafs want deaf old age homes but they also want to be able to travel freely throughout India and abroad. Becoming “equal to normals,” another theme addressed throughout this dissertation, means having opportunities to develop educationally and economically. While deafs might prefer to situate themselves within deaf networks and institutions, they also desire normal recognition of their skills, capabilities, and the language that they use. This tension has permeated this dissertation and it is with this tension that I would like to end. Here are my two diagnoses of this tension, as I see them playing out in the mime performance which I have just discussed.

**Diagnosis One: Salvation Comes from Other Deafs**

I was taken aback by the mime’s theme of “aloneness” and by the fact that our heroine in this performance was alone throughout, without deaf friends to help her.
Missing was the deaf sociality which looms so large in deaf experiences as I have shown throughout this dissertation. Why was our heroine waiting for the bus alone? Why did she not contact a deaf friend to ask for advice about whether she should accept a ride from this man? And where were her deaf friends after her lover ran off and she needed help? Had her deaf friends been there to save her, our heroine would not have been spoiled, both literally and figuratively. As I have argued throughout this work, my interlocutors constantly turned to each other in search of “help and support,” advice, and guidance. Deaf people “saved” others from going down wrong paths. Deaf worlds were compared and contrasted with normal worlds and the former were seen as spaces of connection, communication, and development while the latter are seen as treacherous and potentially unsafe. So why were our heroine’s friends not there to save her? This mime therefore can be seen as a discussion about the importance of being “on guard” in the larger normal world and seeking refuge, or salvation, within deaf social networks.

Diagnosis Two: Salvation Comes From Normals Learning Sign (and Communication Access in the Normal World)

This mime is also a compelling story about the ways, both literally and figuratively, that the normal world penetrates the deaf world (it is in fact an example of what has been called penetration stories, a genre of story telling popular in deaf worlds that Bechter (2009) argues exists to dramatize deaf ambivalence about the necessity of communicating with and living alongside hearing people) and the mixed feelings that deaf people have about this penetration. Our heroine first rejects this normal suitor’s invitation by establishing and emphasizing that she is different from him: she is deaf and he is normal. He counters by telling her that he loves deaf people and so she accepts his proposition, perhaps despite her better instincts. However, he winds up betraying her. She seeks help, alone in a normal world, with no success. Yet the performance ends with a plea: “We want normal people to learn sign language so that we are not alone.”

This plea reveals that those making it have not given up hope: normal people can learn sign language and in doing so they will learn what is important to deaf people. Implied here too is that it is not enough for normals to say that they love deafs; normals also have to learn what is important to deaf people. When normal people learn sign language, they will learn to respect deaf people and they will not take advantage of them. What this mime illustrates is that deafs have not given up on normals: they are born in normal families, they work alongside them, they join pyramid schemes under them, and they have normal teachers, managers, friends, and family members. And so if only normals would learn sign language. When normals learn sign language, according to this diagnosis, deafs and normals will be equal, and therefore deafs will be “saved.”

There can be no “Deaf Normal Same”

This dissertation has analyzed the production of sociality and the making of aspirations by deaf people in urban areas of India against a backdrop of structural obstacles. For my interlocutors, the most important of those structural obstacles is that most normal people do not know sign language nor do they understand the importance of it to deaf people. In the process of trying to navigate and negotiate spaces that have not been made with sign language using deaf people in mind, deaf people recreate these spaces and in the process of doing so, they create deaf selves and develop orientations
towards other deaf people, orientations which are characterized by a sense of “deaf deaf same.” What would happen if they did not need to do this? What would it be like if spaces were actually created properly, incorporating sign language and providing deafs with opportunities to develop in multiple ways, in the first go-round? While I agree with Lefebvre’s argument that “To change life…we must first change space” (Lefebvre 1991, 190), I also contend that there is something different about deaf sociality and deaf moral orientations. This difference means that changing spaces might not result in the obliteration of deaf sociality as deaf people are incorporated into normal worlds; “deaf normal same” may never be possible.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, there is something unique about deaf sociality, something that is more than just two or more deaf bodies together in space. It is about being intensely oriented towards other deaf people, wanting to help and support them, and desiring deaf run and administered institutions. Indeed, a desire for deaf development is more than just a desire for more sign language in the world, it is a desire for deaf people to be capable and confident as they both build deaf worlds and circulate through normal ones. As I hope I have successfully argued, there is a moral component to the concept of deaf development as well whereby deaf people come to see themselves as required to help each other. The end goal is for all deafs to become confident, strong, and capable of moving successfully through both deaf and normal worlds, therefore rendering situations such as that depicted in the mime performance unlikely to occur.

As such, once deaf people achieve deaf development, they will be “equal to normals:” they will be equal in educational and job opportunities (in multiple and diverse fields). They will also be more confident in their interactions with normals and in their ability to circulate through what might be considered “normal spaces.” However, I would argue that “equal” and “same” are two different things, that sameness is an ontology that must be cultivated and developed. It is this ontology that makes deaf spaces unique (Lefebvre 1991, 379). And so even if spaces-- vocational training institutions, sites of employment, churches, and pyramid schemes for example-- were made with sign language using deaf people in mind, I argue that there would still be an ontological orientation (“deaf deaf same”) which is unique to deaf people. And it is this ontological orientation that makes it so easy to sign “deaf deaf same” across a crowded bus to someone whom you have never met before.
References


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