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Deaf Capital: An Exploration of the Relationship between Stigma and Value in Deaf Multilevel Marketing Participation in Urban India

This article ethnographically examines how some deaf people in urban India have begun to orient themselves toward the future by participating in multilevel marketing businesses. In the absence of other structural possibilities for deaf future-making, deaf Indians have turned to such businesses in search of social, economic, and moral livelihood. This article analyzes participation in one particular business and asks how participating within the business both enables and disables the cultivation of specific ideas of development. Particular attention is devoted to exploring the multiple registers of the concept of “deaf development” and how such development may be cultivated through multilevel marketing businesses. This article aims to make a critical intervention in medical anthropology studies of disability by arguing that disability (or in this case deafness) can function as a source of value, therefore highlighting tensions between stigma and value. [deaf, disability, stigma, India, development]

Silver Venture is about business. About 1000 deaf in India join it to earn better and transform our lives.

—SMS sent to author by deaf Silver Venture member

Introduction: Deaf Capital

Many sign language–using deaf Indians in Indian cities have turned to multilevel marketing businesses as sources of livelihood and sociality. Such businesses are based on the premise that social capital can be transformed into financial capital. In this article, I argue that an analysis of deaf participation in such businesses is an important intervention into how medical anthropologists think about disability and deafness in late modernity. Medical anthropologists have long utilized two dominant frameworks for analyzing disability: individual, familial, or societal negotiations with stigma (e.g., Ablon 1988; Frank 2000; Weiss 2002) and medicalization and the emergence of medicalized subjectivities and (bio)socialities (e.g., Kohrman 2005; Petryna 2002; Rapp 1999). In moving beyond these two frameworks, I propose instead to examine what might be considered the opposite of these frameworks.

That is, I argue that medical anthropologists must examine the complicated relationship that exists between stigma and value and the role that non-medicalized socialities play in creating new forms of social, moral, and economic value. In this case study, deafness, or rather, deaf sociality, becomes a privileged site of recruitment and

extraction and there is much tension between stigma and value. Indeed, deafness becomes deaf capital in the “competition ... of the excluded” (Verdery 1996:203). It is therefore important to analyze how stigma is reinscribed as value in neoliberal times and to consider who benefits from this reinscription. As success in multilevel marketing is based on the intermingling of social, moral, and economic value, I argue that such businesses (although they are rarely successful) are key sites for exploring these questions. Moving forward, I turn to the scene of an anniversary function for a popular multilevel marketing business that has many deaf members throughout India.

On August 1, 2009, I traveled from Bangalore, in south India, to Pune, a bustling city in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, to attend a *mela*, or celebratory function, marking the two-year anniversary of deaf peoples’ involvement in Silver Venture, an international multilevel marketing business.¹ Silver Venture labels itself as providing “interactive business opportunities” through direct sales (from the company to individual representatives) of numismatic gold coins, health products, watches and jewelry, vacation packages, and telecommunications. The company started in Taiwan in 1998 and has offices throughout Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. In India, members make a one-time payment of around 30,000 rupees, approximately \$500.00 USD, and with this payment they buy either a numismatic gold coin or a fused glass energy disc that is said to increase vitality when placed close to the body.² Members can also buy and sell vacation packages but these were more expensive and therefore less popular among deaf members.

Silver Venture members are told that the products are not as valuable as recruiting people for the business: the real value comes from becoming an independent representative and recruiting others. When people join the business, they become a downline to the person whom they joined under. After they recruits someone, they become that person’s upline. Uplines receive a percentage of their downline’s initiation payment and then smaller percentages after that for each subsequent downline who joins under them. A pyramid-like structure develops, fanning out and becoming broader as more members are recruited.³ There are distinct lineages and teams within the pyramid structure that can be tracked through an online e-commerce system on the company’s glamorous-looking website.

This *mela* for deaf people, known within Silver Venture as “special friends” (a term that I will explain later), was the second one ever held. Deaf people from all over India converged on Pune for this five-hour function.⁴ Expectations were very high as last year’s first anniversary function had brought almost one thousand special friends to Pune, including at least 20 members from Bangalore. For this second anniversary function, I accompanied members of Team Commitment, a deaf Silver Venture team based in Bangalore but with members all over India. Throughout June and July at Bangalore-based weekly meetings of Team Commitment, Rajesh, Team Commitment’s young and energetic leader, encouraged team members to travel to Pune. At one 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 questions⁵:

Rajesh: What happened when people talked [in sign language] during the workshops?

Sharad: They were told not to talk and escorted out.

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 tapped by their neighbor to have them pay attention.

In emphasizing the attention required of attendees, Rajesh was implying that this event was different from other deaf events at the time, such as cultural performances, sporting events, and social club meetings, where deaf people tended to gossip, share news with friends, and use their mobile phones to send text messages. Rajesh was also differentiating Silver Venture from the many other multilevel marketing businesses that deaf people could join at the time: businesses with lower initiation payments that also did not require much investment of time or effort. In contrast, special friends functions were spaces where practices such as disciplined learning, carefully paying attention, and deaf entrepreneurship were cultivated. In these spaces, new ideas of “deaf development” were emerging that were structured by the constellation of deaf peoples’ social and economic positioning in India, their distinct orientations, and the liberalization of the Indian economy that has resulted in fewer previously taken-for-granted government jobs and precarious private sector employment.

Deaf in Urban India

Deaf children in India (and arguably everywhere in the world) are typically born into hearing families that do not learn sign language. Most Indian deaf schools, many of which are operated by the state, utilize the oral method of education in which deaf children are supposed to be taught to lipread and speak, with very little success (Bhattacharya 2010; Broota 2005; Zeshan et al. 2005). Currently, the Rehabilitation Council of India, the government body overseeing special schools and teacher training programs, offers only a 15-day Indian Sign Language course to teachers in training and it does not permit deaf teachers to teach in government schools. Many deaf people told me that they passed their Secondary School Leaving Certificates without actually learning (and that they passed through copying from each other, often with the help of teachers or administrators; such copying is a deaf “social fact” and discussed openly). They learn varieties of Indian Sign Language and important social, moral, and economic skills from each other (e.g., how to interact with other deaf people and hearing people, how to act appropriately toward people of the opposite sex, and how to find and maintain employment).

Previously, after completing state-run and private vocational training programs, many deaf people found work in government industries and the public sector more generally because of a 1% employment reservation. However, as a result of neoliberal reforms, government industries are downsizing and employment, as well as social services, are increasingly found in the private sector. Although there were many deaf people in their forties or older with government jobs, many of my younger interlocutors worked for multinational corporations (where they did low-skilled business process outsourcing and data entry work) or in India’s growing hospitality sector (as food service workers or merchandise stockers).⁶ Corporations employing them do so under the framework of corporate social responsibility and they publicize such employment in order to receive favorable attention.⁷

Vocational training and job placement services are increasingly provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that receive funding from corporations. In many cases,

fundings are the same corporations hiring deaf workers. This downsizing of the state is a source of much disappointment to deaf people, although, to be clear, many feel that their needs have *never* been met by the state (compare Gupta 2012; Gupta and Sharma 2006; Sharma 2008). In fact, India's major disability legislation, the 1995 Persons with Disability (Equal Opportunities and Protection) Act does not mention sign language at all (and the act was passed after advocacy by physically disabled and blind Indians without much deaf representation). (Bhambani 2004). As such, businesses such as Silver Venture have become privileged sites to mitigate both disappointment and the sense that the state does not "take care of deaf people," a statement often made by my interlocutors.

I conducted ethnographic research on deaf involvement in multilevel marketing businesses from 2008 to 2010 in Bangalore, Delhi, Pune, and Mysore. It is not clear how many deaf people have joined such businesses (although a leader in Silver Venture estimated that there were about one thousand deaf people who had joined). However, during this period, such businesses had a major presence in deaf sociality, and deaf people frequently discussed them in everyday conversations. I attended recruitment meetings, team strategy sessions, and large melas as mentioned above. I conducted semi-structured interviews with deaf leaders and deaf independent representatives in this business. I had informal conversation with many deaf people who did not join these businesses but who were very aware of their operations. In addition, I conducted archival research on the role of Silver Venture and other multilevel marketing businesses in India to understand how the state and trade organizations viewed them.

The specific focus of this article is middle- and upper-class sign language-using Indian deaf participants living in Pune and Bangalore who were located at the middle or the top of Silver Venture's deaf lineages, although success in Silver Venture (and in deaf social networks more broadly) does not necessarily map onto class or caste. The reason for this is because one's ability to communicate using sign language and one's access to useful information gives one status vis-à-vis other deaf people. Communicative competence has less to do with class and more to do with whether one has access to sign language-using deaf role models and peers. As such, a lower-middle-class deaf person with deaf parents and a larger deaf network could be more successful in the Silver Venture structure than an affluent deaf person who was raised orally with poor sign language skills. Indeed, there were deaf people from affluent families who were not desired recruits because they did not have strong sign language skills due to attending hearing schools and lack of exposure to sign language-using deaf people. I focus on those at the middle or the top of Silver Venture's deaf lineages, but there was most certainly a deaf bottom of the pyramid, both empirically and analytically. Those at the bottom were supposed to follow their uplines' success, although as I discuss, they often did not (and could not).

Re-thinking how Medical Anthropologists Theorize Disability

Returning to the quote with which I opened this article, Silver Venture ostensibly offered deaf participants the opportunity to transform their lives through being part of a deaf sociality (social practices and processes) oriented toward imagining and creating new futures. I argue that participation in Silver Venture provided a space for cultivating what my interlocutors called deaf development and engaging in practices that would facilitate such development. By deaf development, my interlocutors were referring to the desire for the emergence of

deaf-administered structures and institutions that privilege distinctively deaf ways of being in the world such as valuing sign language, helping other deaf people, and sharing and working collectively.

Desiring deaf development requires deaf orientations through which deaf people are required to share information and skills that they have learned with other deaf people, recruit other deaf people to attend deaf events and learn sign language, and engage in what I call ongoing “sameness work,” through which differences such as class, caste, religion, gender, geographic background, and educational levels are negotiated to create a sense of a cohesive deaf sociality.⁸ When deaf development takes place, there will be fewer structural obstacles in society and *all* deaf people will be able to live, learn, and work in conditions more of their own making.

In thinking about Silver Venture as a space for cultivating deaf development, I want to consider how multilevel marketing produced a space for deafness to function as a valued condition. More broadly, I want to consider how the current Indian neoliberal political economic structure has created conditions of possibility for deafness to function as a marker of inclusion (in the face of both broader structural exclusion and token inclusion in the private sector). In particular, Silver Venture allowed deaf participants to transform social capital in the form of deaf friends and acquaintances into financial capital. This transformation happened through taking advantage of dense deaf social networks that were often formed and sedimented over many years: Deaf people typically went through many years of schooling together in segregated deaf schools, attended vocational training programs specifically for deaf people, and were members of deaf social, sports, and/or trade organizations. In taking advantage of these networks, participants used their subject positions as deaf people and members of a deaf sociality to recruit other deaf people to these schemes. Deafness therefore became a valued condition and a gateway for participating in Silver Venture.

In analyzing how deafness (and deaf sociality) is productive of new forms of social, moral, and economic practices, I build on James Staples’s (2005) work with Indian lepers in which he urges analysts to examine disability through another lens besides that of stigma and rehabilitation. Staples writes: “The same clawed hand and distorted face that provokes social ostracism might also serve as a vital resource for collecting alms and for accessing other benefits” (p. 13). As Staples shows, lepers are able to use their stigmatized bodily deformities to provide for themselves and their families. Staples’s work departs from the norm of academic and policy work on disability in India that tends to depict disabled people as the most marginalized, poor, and downtrodden (e.g., Harriss-White and Erb 2002; Hiranandani and Sonpal 2010; Klasing 2007; World Bank 2007).

In following Staples, I hope to highlight tensions between stigma and value and explore how stigma can be reinscribed as value (also see Staples [2011] on the importance of nuancing how we theorize stigma). In doing so, I examine how middle- and upper-class deaf people negotiated and utilized deafness to their advantage through participating in multilevel marketing schemes. These deaf people were perhaps embodying ideal neoliberal entrepreneurial subjectivity in which they identified as deaf people who were responsible for taking care of, and affiliating with, others with the same identity (and their practices therefore differed from those of Staples’s interlocutors in that they were explicitly entrepreneurial). In foregrounding their deaf orientations, my interlocutors were emphasizing that the discourse of deaf development extended to *all* deaf people, not just those involved in Silver Venture (Rose 1999).

While my research with Silver Venture's special friends might not seem to diverge from what has already been written about pyramid schemes in other places (e.g., Cahn 2006, 2011; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Dolan and Johnstone-Louis 2011; Verdery 1996; Wilson 1999), I wish to make a broader argument of relevance to medical anthropology—beyond the role of deafness in enabling multilevel marketing participation—about the role (and the enrollment) of disability in late modernity/neoliberal times.⁹ In doing so, I depart from the mainstream Disability Studies canon that argues that as a result of new labor and living arrangements under the industrial revolution, “disability,” as both an analytical concept and lived way of experiencing the world, emerged. According to this body of work, feudal and agricultural societies were inclusive of bodily difference. In contrast, under capitalism, factories demanded a specific kind of “able” body and the state began to exert control according to, and along the lines of, bodily difference (e.g., Barnes and Mercer 2010; Gleeson 1998; Oliver 1990).

In contrast, this case study illustrates how late capitalism, or specifically the Indian neoliberal political economic structure of the present, has found a way of including those who might otherwise be excluded through participation in multilevel marketing businesses.¹⁰ As such, it seems to me that medical anthropologists must shift their analytical framework to analyzing not only how disabled people are excluded but also how and where they are included. That is, they must be attentive to the ways that stigma and value work hand in hand and how disability is increasingly included in workplaces and social and political structures in ways that are not always to disabled peoples' advantage.

Silver Venture and Special Friends

Where did the category 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, a hearing independent representative known to his downlines as Guide of Destiny (G.O.D), sat in a massive black leather armchair and enthusiastically proclaimed: “Hello my special friends I love you!” Large and garrulous, he went on to state that he preferred to call “those who the world call as deaf” his special friends “because they are close to my heart.”

Sathi said that he joined Silver Venture in 2001 and was always interested in helping “the less privileged.” However it was not until 2007, after he became a millionaire, that he found a way to help those who would become his special friends. One of his downlines worked with a deaf man named Bhupen, and this downline conducted a prosperity meeting, Silver Venture's jargon for a recruitment session, with him. After the prosperity meeting, Bhupen joined and rapidly recruited other deaf people as his downlines. In September 2007, there were around 35 deaf members of Silver Venture living in Pune. In response to these growing numbers, Sathi decided to donate an air-conditioned conference room on a weekly basis, provide sign language interpretation for trainings, and caption Silver Venture training videos. Sathi was considered to be the father and great upline of all deaf teams in India. Deaf members often cheered and applauded when someone used the category special friend or mentioned Sathi at a Silver Venture meeting.

Deaf people did not see the word “special” as paternalistic or stigmatizing (as I initially did). Rather, they saw it as a sign of care and as a loving way to recognize that they were different from hearing people (and it produced a distinct rhetoric of “inclusive”

recruitment). While most deaf people had never met Sathi, he was more than just an abstract business leader; he was seen as a nurturing and enabling supporter of deaf development in all of its registers. His acronym G.O.D reflects this and his pastoral power (Foucault 2007), derived from both providing technical access such as closed captioned videos *and* motivational support and inspiration. Deaf Silver Venture events were always interpreted, and when top deaf leaders traveled to Malaysia for a conference, interpreters accompanied them. Many training videos were also interpreted, notably by some of India's most well-known interpreters.

Special friends spoke about this level of access proudly, and it was juxtaposed with access elsewhere: There were few certified interpreters in India and even fewer schools, colleges, and workplaces hired interpreters on a daily basis or for special meetings or functions. As discussed above, provision of communication access was not legally mandated, and there were very few spaces where Indian deaf people felt that their communication modalities were appreciated and actually utilized—and Silver Venture was one such space. As Sathi stated in the second anniversary special friends video: “This business gives an equal opportunity to everyone.” Indeed, not only did Silver Venture appear to give deaf people an “equal opportunity,” but it appeared to be particularly well designed for deaf participation because it seemingly permitted deaf people to transform their dense social networks into financial capital, and deaf people were able to work almost exclusively with other deaf people.

The Anthropologist's First Prosperity Meeting

I now analyze a Silver Venture prosperity meeting to examine how Silver Venture both appealed to and included deaf participants. In particular, I examine how deaf orientations, future aspirations, and ultimately, themes of deaf development are deployed by Silver Venture's special friends to recruit other deaf people. The first prosperity meeting that I attended took place in Bangalore in September 2008. It was conducted by Aparna, a tall and fashionable deaf woman in her early thirties with excellent Indian Sign Language and English writing skills. These skills allowed her to communicate easily with deaf and hearing people from all walks of life (thanks to attending an innovative private school for deaf children that encouraged the use of sign language), and she had cultivated a vast deaf and hearing social network. Aparna was financially well supported by her husband's family and she had a stable and fairly well-paying (by deaf standards) job as a graphic designer. However, she felt that her earnings were not enough to support her lifestyle aspirations and she valued the challenges and sociality offered by Silver Venture. She therefore used her earnings to join the business.

Arriving at Aparna's house, I discovered that the other attendees were two young women and a young man in their twenties who worked at different coffee café chains as baristas, a friend of the young man who was studying for a bachelors degree in computer applications, and Naveen, a deaf pastor at one of Bangalore's many deaf churches who said that he came just to “see and learn.”¹¹ After chatting informally for a while, we clustered around the coffee table in the sitting room for the prosperity meeting. Aparna started by telling 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 PowerPoint presentation (which had been given to her by Dinesh, a Pune-based deaf leader).

This presentation began with a discussion of dreams: Aparna said 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; Aparna responded to this by stating that at the rate that he was earning, it would not be possible. She then rapidly scrolled through pictures of various objects of desire: a big bungalow, a Ferrari car, a world tour, good education for children, and money for retirement. We were told that, like most of the world, we would never be able to afford these things. She then showed us 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. The implication was that by joining Silver Venture and being connected to other uplines and downlines, there would always be a steady stream of revenue running. This cluster of houses could also be seen as representing a wider Indian deaf sociality in which participants worked together to help and support each other and the water and money were metaphors for deaf development, gained through working together.

Indeed, much time during the presentation was devoted to the idea of helping others. Asking “Who does not want to help people?” Aparna stressed that the Silver Venture foundation, Silver Venture’s philanthropic branch, had donated money to NGOs around the world. She showed us a scrapbook filled with various certificates attesting to Silver Venture’s humanitarian work and pictures of famous members of Silver Venture performing charitable works. Aparna connected this to desires to help other deaf people, and she said that participating in the business would enable us to do so through donating money to deaf organizations and schools. 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 featured in the clips: the 26-year-old man who retired after becoming a millionaire and the bored housewife who joined Silver Venture despite her husband’s resistance and subsequently wound up earning more than him. In addition to these success stories, Aparna also showed us pictures of deaf Silver Venture uplines in Malaysia and at other international conferences, thereby promoting ideas of deaf mobility and of deaf people being equal to hearing people.

After Aparna finished, we sat around drawing diagrams of uplines and downlines because we struggled to understand how the business worked: We drew lines and circles connecting individuals to two people beneath them. These diagrams resembled both pyramids and family trees in which there is one parent (an upline) who spawns two children (downlines). These family trees, through linking deaf people to each other, again stressed ideas of deaf orientations and bonds. Those present, with the exception of the pastor, seemed excited about joining, as Silver Venture represented both an escape from their low-paying hospitality jobs and an opportunity to participate in a seemingly deaf-centered job that was more rewarding. However, none of these attendees were able to join due to lack of funds.

Aspirations, Hopes, and Dreams

This prosperity meeting was not dissimilar to others that I would subsequently see, although many did not involve laptops or PowerPoint presentations. However, all of the meetings

followed a similar template of providing attendees an opportunity to share and therefore cultivate, their hopes and dreams for the future.¹² These hopes and dreams were social, economic, and moral in nature: Participants wanted bungalows *and* they wanted better deaf schools where deaf children could receive good educations.

Kishore, a deaf cyber café owner and Silver Venture member, 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 learning about special friend leaders' journeys all over India. He thought that it would be wonderful 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, although she was also interested in wine tasting and horseback riding as well.

Since the formation of the All India Federation of the Deaf in 1955, deaf people have traveled all over India for sporting events and competitions, deaf culture seminars, and beauty and dance pageants, often in large groups.¹³ Such traveling, even to a neighboring city or state, was an important part of being a member of a deaf organization. However, the kind of traveling that special friends wanted differed from this form of institutional deaf travel as it was independent, purely recreational, and unfettered by deaf bureaucracies. (And many younger deaf people felt that deaf organizations, run by older deaf men and women, were out of touch with their needs and experiences.)

In addition to this aspiration for personal mobility and independence, deaf people also repeatedly expressed a desire to help other deaf people, a dominant theme in the discourse of deaf development. Dinesh, a deaf leader in Silver Venture based in Pune who traveled all over India, told me repeatedly that Silver Venture provided him with freedom and time to help other deaf people. If he had a regular job, he would not be able to meet and help deaf people as frequently as he did (although he did not give me examples of how he helped people aside from encouraging them to participate in the business). He regaled me with stories of how he had helped very poor deaf people join the business and prosper. Both Dinesh and Kishore told me that they dreamed of building old age homes for deaf senior citizens. Minoo, a woman in her late fifties and perhaps the oldest member of Team Wonderful Dream in Bangalore, told me: "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 (imagined) earnings for deaf development—for creating better education options for the deaf as well as deaf-run institutions. Deaf development, then, was a theme running through prosperity meetings and members often explicitly talked about how they saw Silver Venture as a way of cultivating a better future for *all* deaf people, not just Silver Venture members.¹⁴

Underlying these hopes and dreams for better deaf schools and deaf old age homes 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, another Pune-based Silver Venture deaf leader, saw Silver Venture as operating as the provider that the state is not. Her words echo the words of many other special friends:

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.

In contrast to the state, deaf people felt that Silver Venture offered possibilities for deaf development. Dinesh, Pinky, and other Pune-based uplines argued that Pune was a site of such development in the present. Indeed, Pune leaders constantly entreated downlines and potential recruits to “Come to Pune and see for yourself.”

No Banquet at the Second Anniversary Program

And many of us did come 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 people attending. Instead, there were about 250 attendees sitting on plastic chairs in a dim hall. Why such a decline in numbers? One obvious reason was that India was experiencing significant inflation and a downturn in economic growth, a source of much confusion and concern, and many deaf people were either afraid to join the business or lacked money. Another reason was 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 people to join for a variety of reasons: They could not explain the business clearly as a result of their sign language skills or lack of understanding themselves; they expected their uplines to do the presentations for them; and Silver Venture started developing a “bad” reputation. Deaf people constantly mentioned that the Silver Venture office in Ahmedabad had been shut down by the police because of allegations of fraud, that the coins were not real gold, and that the bio-disk did not work. Downlines complained about the lack of training that they received from uplines and there was fighting within teams over who would recruit potential deaf members. And teams fought over the finite number of deaf people left to recruit.

Despite the rousing presentations and testimonies, at the end of the anniversary function the mood was melancholic 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, new schools for the deaf, and deaf old age homes. Most of my interlocutors never recouped their initial investment. And despite claims to the contrary, there was clear class (re)production that took place as those at the head of deaf lineages sought out increasingly poorer deaf people to join under them, therefore producing and reproducing the “bottom of the pyramid” as both an empirical and analytic category.

This is not to say that there were not people who were still excited and optimistic. I talked to one deaf young man from Mumbai whose deaf father joined the business under Dinesh over a year prior but still had not received training. When I asked this young man if he thought that his father’s opportunity was now ruined, he responded: “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 still ordered his Bangalore team to meet weekly although his downlines were not successful at recruiting anyone themselves. At the last Team Commitment meeting that I attended, Rajesh excitedly announced that he had recruited the treasurer of the Kerala Deaf Association and that this person had many contacts. Perhaps there were still untapped

markets, more social capital to transform into financial capital. And as for deaf people who lost their financial investment, they still gained something: language, discourses, and practices for imagining and creating new deaf futures. While the failure of Silver Venture could have resulted in acrimonious ruptures in deaf sociality, deaf social fabric appeared to be largely untouched. This was because of the “sameness work” that deaf people engaged in and the importance of maintaining a cohesive and harmonious deaf sociality oriented toward collective deaf development.

Multilevel Marketing Circulations

Silver Venture was not the only multilevel marketing business in which deaf people participated; in the absence of other deaf-centered employment opportunities, such businesses in general were perceived as being an engine toward deaf development, as after all, as Pinky and Kishore told me, *the government does not help deaf people*. In addition to Silver Venture, there were at least five other deaf multilevel marketing businesses operating in Bangalore, and it was not uncommon for people to belong to Silver Venture *and* other businesses. Recruitment sessions were mostly held in large halls in colleges and corporations, spaces that were mostly inaccessible to deaf people on other days. Paper invitations in envelopes were distributed at one recruitment session for yet another and SMSes were circulated to invite deaf people to come to meetings and learn about different businesses. These invitations often guaranteed prosperity and began with questions such as “Deaf’s future how?” Unlike Silver Venture, these other schemes did not require as much of a financial investment and cost around 3,000 rupees compared to Silver Venture’s 30,000 rupees. In addition, members rarely met in regimented and organized fashions to strategize and discuss dreams as they did with Silver Venture. There was less at stake socially, morally, and economically.

I want to talk about one recruitment session that I unexpectedly attended in order to demonstrate where businesses surface and the role that they play in deaf worlds. In September 2008, I attended a function hosted by a deaf Hare Krishna teacher named Devananda for Krishna’s birthday celebration. As part of this program, there was storytelling about Krishna, an art contest, and a discussion of Hindu morality and the importance of good behavior. At the end of the program, Devananda invited a hearing woman up onto the stage to talk about a business that she was recruiting for, called Golden Days. Devananda was a member of this business (in addition to being a member of Silver Venture: His dream was to build an ashram for deaf people) and he invited this woman to present at the function after soliciting donations from her for Krishna’s birthday. With the help of another deaf Golden Days member, this woman talked about the benefits of the business and the guaranteed income that participants would earn. At the end, many people signed up before enjoying a rice dinner to celebrate Krishna’s birthday.

When I talked about this recruitment session with Chetan, the deaf government worker and Silver Venture member I mentioned earlier, he said that deaf people needed money and that this was a good business for them; he said that Golden Days was one way for deaf people to help each other and become financially independent. Chetan’s words point to the salience of such businesses in deaf worlds. In this setting the social, moral, and economic components of deaf development were found: Deaf attendees learned about the importance of good behavior and financial success.

Indeed, multilevel marketing could be found in unexpected places: dusty courtyards of vocational training centers where deaf trainees ate lunch, high-tech information technology offices where deaf people worked as back office data entry operators, deaf clubs where older deaf men employed as manual laborers drank tea, and deaf churches and Hindu gatherings. To be sure, there were also participants who attended recruitment sessions for the complimentary tea and samosas, the opportunity to socialize with deaf friends, and the entertainment invariably provided by PowerPoint presentations and demonstrations of products. Yet, in observing PowerPoint presentations proclaiming that everyone has dreams, that it is important to save for the future, and that deaf people must help each other, they were producing and participating in both material and affective space for considering what this future might be and for speculating about deaf development.

Conclusion

Silver Venture and other multilevel marketing businesses have become key sites for seeking deaf development in urban India because of their unique recruitment structures and their dependence on transforming social capital into financial capital. By deaf development, I mean the multiple registers of social, moral, and economic development that include developing deaf orientations, helping and sharing with other deaf people, and having access to financial capital and consumption. Many deaf participants felt that Silver Venture would provide deaf people with the social, moral, and economic tools that were needed to cultivate deaf development (and they felt that Silver Venture leaders were examples of such development). These tools included new sign language form and content for sharing aspirations, hopes, and future-oriented narratives, financial capital to build deaf schools and deaf old age homes, the ability to engage in consumption, and the skills needed to become confident and strong deaf people capable of recruiting others.

As time went on and the heady first days and months of deaf involvement dissipated, it became clear to some that Silver Venture, despite being a “gift” from G.O.D., was not the boon that it initially appeared to be; there was a disjuncture between discourses of development and actual material development. Those at the bottom of the pyramid struggled to find downlines and regretted that they had invested money in the business. A few special friends attempted to quit, but leaders exerted heavy pressure on them to stay involved and search for downlines. Most of my interlocutors did not recoup their initial investment although leaders still searched for new downlines. To be sure, the discourse of deaf development extended beyond Silver Venture and dreams for better deaf schools, deaf old age homes, and new consumption practices continued to exist. These dreams may have become stronger for Silver Venture participants and on-lookers because Silver Venture provided conditions of possibility for imagining new futures.

This is the story of special friends who, because of the particular resonance of this structure of opportunity with their already existing (and emerging) social forms, are in the process of cultivating new social, moral, and economic worlds. This is therefore a story of both the specificities of deaf development and the generalities of new possibilities and constraints enabled by economic change in urban India. This is also a story of how deafness becomes deaf capital under neoliberal businesses such as multilevel marketing. Deaf participation in Silver Venture illustrates how neoliberalism enables and disables the

inclusion of certain kinds of bodies, identities, and orientations and it highlights the disjuncture between discursive and material development.

Ultimately, deaf multilevel marketing business participation foregrounds tensions between inclusion and exclusion and stigma and value. Indeed, case studies like this push medical anthropologists to rethink the category of stigma and how it operates (or not) under neoliberalism. I argue that medical anthropologists interested in the category of disability must also consider the non-medicalized socialities and subjectivities that emerge alongside and in relation to it. In addition, we must ask how these socialities and subjectivities enable new forms of value-making and inclusion. And perhaps most importantly, we must critically ask who benefits from the multiple forms of value that emerge and from practices of including disabled people. Deaf multilevel marketing participation foregrounds the multiple forms of social, moral, and economic value that are at play and how value is extracted from conditions that might be considered stigmatized.

Notes

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1. I use pseudonyms for the company and all of my interlocutors. As much as possible, I disguise distinguishing features of the company (e.g., where its headquarters are) while also highlighting what makes it unique.

2. Thirty thousand rupees is quite a large amount for lower- and middle-class people. For example, deaf interlocutors who worked in the hospitality sector as food service workers earned between 5,000 and 7,000 rupees a month, while those who worked in information technology enabled services as back office data entry operators earned between 4,000 and 17,000 rupees a month. Public sector employees whom I met earned between 12,000 rupees and 22,000 rupees a month.

3. While Silver Venture functions like a pyramid scheme, my interlocutors called it a “multilevel marketing business” or simply, a “business.” I therefore do the same.

4. Departing from the normative Deaf Studies practice of capitalizing Deaf (started by James Woodward in 1972 to foreground the fact that Deaf people see themselves as belonging to a distinct Deaf culture and as members of a linguistic minority group), I use the term/category deaf. My interlocutors generally did not capitalize deaf in their writing and they did not use the same discourses used both by Deaf Studies scholars and lay members of Western d/Deaf communities.

5. All conversations took place in Indian Sign Language. Indian Sign Language has regional variations, although deaf Indians are able to adapt quickly to variations. I provided the translations from Indian Sign Language to English in the text.

6. The experiences of deaf young adults might not appear to be dissimilar from those of non-deaf youth in which desires for consumption and global imaginaries of such consumption loom large (Fernandes 2000; Liechty 2003; Lukose 2009). However, the particular constellation of opportunities available to deaf young adults in India differs from those available to non-deaf young adults because of poor quality deaf education in which sign

language is not privileged and a rarely enforced state juridical–legal framework that does not provide deaf people with much protection (again, see Bhattacharya 2010; Broota 2005; Zeshan et al. 2010).

7. See Friedner (2013) and Hoffman-Dilloway (2011) on coffee café chains that hire deaf workers in India and Nepal and the feelings that these workers instill in non-deaf customers. See Friedner [2008] for a discussion of how many corporations, notably those in the information technology and hospitality sectors, actively seek to hire disabled workers to both combat attribution and show corporate social responsibility.

8. An example of “sameness work” took place in Bangalore’s Team Wonderful Dream. Arman, a Muslim man was very unhappy about being on the same team as Devananada, a Hare Krishna teacher who he thought was disrespectful to Muslims. Similarly, Chetan was upset about being on the same team as Minoo, a woman he previously worked with in Amway and who he regarded as a thief. Yet everyone adjusted. And when uplines came from Pune, everyone in Bangalore had to adjust to a variety of Indian Sign Language that was different from theirs.

9. I have not seen other academic studies of multilevel marketing business participation in India, although such businesses appear to be ubiquitous among the lower and middle classes and they are often featured and discussed in popular media. While conducting research with other disabled Indians, including physically disabled and blind Indians, it did not seem to me that these businesses were prevalent at all. This could be because deaf social networks were denser because of shared language (and a lack of a shared language with hearing people) and because deaf people experienced more substantial barriers to education and employment (see Broota 2005).

10. I think it is important to problematize *what* people are being included in and *how* this inclusion happens. Inclusion functions as a black box and unspecified authoritative discourse within international and Indian disability rights movements (that have largely embraced neoliberal principles premised on the importance of individual empowerment, independence, and rights).

11. Bangalore had eight deaf churches. They were spaces where deaf people could use sign language, share news, and learn from each other. Deaf people considered them to be spaces of deaf development and they often used the same logics of recruitment to recruit people for churches that they used to recruit for multilevel marketing businesses (thus resonating with Cahn’s [2011] work on multilevel marketing and spirituality).

12. These future-oriented narratives mark a departure from deaf narrative practices in which deaf people share biographies in relation to a wider deaf world to create deaf sociality. (Mindess 2006; Padden and Humphries 2006).

13. Deaf people from diverse class backgrounds were able to travel because of international and domestic funding allocated to such programs. Deaf people were often more mobile than their family members because of this funding—another form of deaf capital.

14. While this desire to help other deaf people might not seem dissimilar to what van Wessel (2004) describes as middle-class Indians negotiating their discomfort toward acquiring material possessions, I argue that this desire to help all deaf people, regardless of class background, is part of deaf sociality in general.

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