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“Deaf people are...potentially and actually members of a transnational and translocal framework that overrides any local or national loyalty they may additionally possess” (Breivik,12)

The above quote by a Scandinavian anthropologist was excerpted from his widely read Deaf Studies/Anthropology work on the importance of transnational identity in understanding the deaf community; Breivik argues that deaf people feel more “at home” in the company of other deaf people even if they are not *of/from the same place*. Indeed, what Breivik is doing is problematizing the importance of “place” for deaf people.

Because this is an extremely provocative statement, and because it articulates well with recent popular culture writing about Bangalore, namely Thomas Friedman’s widely read (2005) book *The World is Flat*, I would like to use the space and time (paper-space-time) to reflect upon the stakes of both of these works (Breivik’s and Friedman’s) for thinking about the particular deaf community at the Association for People with Disability (APD), the NGO where I conducted my summer internship.<sup>1</sup>

APD is perhaps Bangalore’s oldest and most well established non governmental organization for people with disabilities. It was started by and for people with disabilities

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<sup>1</sup> In *The World is Flat*, Friedman writes about an ephiphany that he had while golfing, dining, and shmoozing with the leaders of India’s Information Technology sector. While hanging out in Bangalore with the IT bigwigs, Friedman thinks to himself, “Oh my goodness, this is exactly like America! There are Indians here who are more American than Americans! There is pizza hut here! The world is flat! There is a level playing field!”. While Friedman is writing about transnational flows of capital in the form of outsourcing, I think it is also important to explore the stakes of what he is saying for thinking about the lived experiences of deaf people in Bangalore and how human rights discourses around deafness travel. Especially in light of the fact that this book, and the IT boom in general, have been synonymous with Bangalore in the popular imagination.

in 1959 to provide vocational training and employment opportunities to people with orthopedic disabilities as no such programs previously existed. It was originally run out of a garage at the home of a wealthy family with a daughter with polio (this daughter is now APD's retired matriarch who still comes to the main site two to three times a week "to take a nap", she says). Since then, APD has grown to encompass an integrated school for children with and without disabilities, a wheelchair workshop, physical therapy, community based rehabilitation both in Bangalore and in surrounding rural areas, and vocational training. APD's current location, on a plot that used to be swamp land located on what was then the outskirts of Bangalore but now surrounded by expensive homes and luxury apartment buildings is both testimony to Bangalore's growth and to APD's positioning within Bangalore. While I spent time observing and participating in all of APD's urban programs, I spent the bulk of my time at APD's vocational training center as I was primarily interested in how deaf young adults were provided with training and what kind of social, political, and economic effects this training ultimately has. It should be noted that APD's vocational training program has the largest number of deaf students of any vocational training center in Bangalore and these students come from all classes and religions; there is also a mix of rural and urban students and APD provides housing for rural students in hostels. During my summer, I met students from rural areas in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, all living in hostels or with family members who have migrated to Bangalore for work. These rural students tend to be quite poor and they learn about APD through APD's extensive community based rehabilitation (CBR) work as well as its networking with other NGOs providing services to rural disabled people.

Deaf students can receive training in one of three areas: welding, electrical work, and computer training and they are trained by teachers who are more or less fluent in English, Kannada, the language of Karnataka state, and most importantly for the deaf students, Bangalore Style Indian Sign Language (BSISL).<sup>2</sup> Some of these teachers have disabilities themselves and are former graduates of APD's training programs. Most of these teachers are extremely young (below 30 years of age) and single; unfortunately, due to low salaries, APD does not have a very high retention rate of teachers. Teaching jobs within the NGO's training center are not "professionalized". This lack of retention is quite unfortunate in light of the fact that it takes the new teachers at least 5-6 months to become comfortable using sign language. It was interesting to talk with the teachers within the training center about their work as all expressed a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction about their relationships with students and they loved "helping" the young deaf adults that they worked with. Teachers often said things like: "I want to help the deaf" and "The young deaf adults need me".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Bangalore style India Sign Language is NOT yet a standardized language and those who work on its development (most notably the Chandrashekhara Institute for Speech and Hearing's Sign Language Cell) are resistant to standardization. I argue that BSISL is a contested language space in which an emerging Indian Sign Language (being developed in Mumbai), American Sign Language, and resurgent nationalist language politics around Kannada all jockey for prominence. Interestingly, during my time at APD, I saw BSISL being developed and modified by APD's students and teachers. Signs seem to constantly be changing.

<sup>3</sup>As part of my internship, I spent time with the workshop teachers discussing issues of access and inclusion. For example, when I first arrived at APD, I would often sign and speak at the same time when speaking with the teachers. One teacher said to me: "Why are you signing? I am hearing, I do not need you to sign" and I explained to her that there were deaf young adults around who could not hear and they also needed to have access to the conversation. I tried to institute a total communication policy and I also conducted workshops on interpreting as APD's teachers are often used as interpreters at APD events and out in the community. It appeared to me that these "interpreters" were actually not interpreting everything and so I tried to stress the importance of interpreting ethics. This was an interesting topic in light of the language politics in Bangalore. For example, at some of APD's events half of the speeches were in Kannada and the other half were in English but there was NO interpretation between the two. And so people were often left out if they did not speak both languages (and many do not). So, then, how do we speak about total communication for deaf people?

In order to receive computer training, deaf students are required to know how to read and write English and as a result, these students tend to be wealthier and they tend to have had stronger primary and secondary educations, mostly in English language and signing deaf schools. After finishing their one year computer training course, deaf students hope to find jobs in the IT sector, as web designers, or as animators. I want to note here that computer training is considered to be magical, a space of infinite possibility.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the welding and the electrical students tend to be less affluent and they come from Kannada speaking backgrounds; instruction for these courses is in Kannada. Those doing welding and electrical training hope to find employment within large government industries and factories. Despite a shared experience of deafness and a common sign language, deaf students in the computer training program and those in the welding and electrical programs rarely interact. As one of the training center's teachers told me: "The students in the computer training program do not like to mix with the other students. They think that they are better than the other students."

This division did seem quite palpable and it was interesting to me in light of the fact that in the West, identity politics around deafness tend to be extremely strong and deaf people claim that deafness is in fact not a disability but that deaf people are members of a linguistic minority. There is a strong sense of a monolithic and universal Deaf culture.

The Deaf community in America (and in other Northern democracies) has, by most

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<sup>4</sup> It is also interesting to think about the ways that the computer training course is gendered. Computer training is considered by many families to be "clean" and therefore fit for their daughters while electrical training and welding are "dirty". This summer, I witnessed a brother who came to APD to pull his sister out of the electrical training course and enroll her instead in computer training. When I asked him why he wanted to do this, he said that he thought that electrical work was "dirty work".

accounts, successfully organised to secure access to education provided in sign language, sign language interpretation, appropriate telephone technology, and other services and technologies. In addition, the deaf community in American has established Gallaudet University, the world's oldest and only liberal arts college exclusively for the deaf.

At this point one might be wondering what a university in Washington, DC has to do with a vocational training center in Bangalore, India. Many of the deaf students in the computer training program knew about Gallaudet. I was frequently asked if I went to Gallaudet and when I said no, they asked why not. These deaf students have had exposure to what I call “global Deafness”<sup>i</sup>—a highly specific concept of Deafness based upon ideas of a universal Deaf culture and community. Through internet chat groups, deaf social events, deaf religious organizations, and visits by members of northern Deaf organisations, these students learn about global deafness. In addition, many of these deaf students attended a primary and secondary school that was started with the help of an America deaf missionary; this school has obviously been influenced by this missionary's attempts to stress the importance of deaf identity and empowerment. Indeed, older members of the deaf community in Bangalore speak affectionately about this man, “White Joe” and the work that he did for the Bangalore deaf community. I heard many stories about White Joe's efforts to instil a sense of “deaf pride” in deaf people as well as his attempts to teach American Sign Language to people who before then did not have access to a standardized sign language. Returning to Friedman here, it might be interesting to think about the ways that this particular world of global deafness is a flat one—knowledge about deafness travels effortlessly through the internet and these deaf

Indians often see themselves as being part of a deaf community that is not bounded by place.

In contrast, many of the deaf students in the electrical and welding programs have never used a computer and they are learning a standardized sign language for the first time as young adults. These students are learning English as well as the majority of them attended Kannada language primary and secondary schools. These students do not have the same conceptions of deafness that their peers in the computer training program do and they have never heard of Gallaudet University. They do not necessarily think of deafness in terms of identity, community, or culture. Their world is most definitely not flat—especially in the sense that many of these students travel 20 miles to and from APD on public buses and due to the condition of the roads, this journey takes over 2 hours each way. The divide between the computer students and the welding and electrical students is interesting on another level: job placements in the new IT sector provide significantly higher salaries and are a product of neo-liberal economic policies especially in the sense that the 1995 Indian disability law does not apply to the private sector. As such, deaf employees are hired under the murky mandate of corporate social responsibility. In contrast, the electrical and welding positions are mostly in large government factories, relics of a past in which the Indian state engaged in centralized planning and controlled the means of production. These factories' wages are incredibly low compared to those of the IT sector. I am not attempting to set up neat and clean binaries here: flat versus non-flat, deafness as identity and culture versus deafness not as identity and culture, neo-liberal employment versus public sector employment—obviously there are exceptions to

this and the lived realities of these students are extremely multifaceted and complex, variegated by class, gender, religion, caste, etc. These binaries becomes even more ambiguous when actual employment rates are considered as those receiving electrical and welding training have a much higher placement rate than those receiving computer training due to the fact that the primary demand in the IT sector is for people who can provide telephone support therefore excluding deaf people. I point this out because I do not want to provide too rosy of a picture of the IT sector as I believe that Thomas Friedman and many others do. For deaf young adults without advanced educations, the IT sector has not been such a boon.<sup>5</sup>

In the beginning of June, APD hosted the 2007 American- Indian Deaf Empowerment Camp, a 7 day program in which a delegation of 8 deaf young adults from America came to Bangalore to work with deaf Indians and, in their words, to “empower”, “encourage”, and “support” them in their struggle for deaf human rights; they did this under the mantle of global deafness. These deaf Americans, with the exception of one, had never been to India before and they were not provided with any preparation materials by the sponsoring organization, Global Reach Out. They were all either college students or recent graduates. The eight Indian delegates who were chosen to participate in the program included three graduates of APD’s computer training program—two who had gone on for higher education and one who was working as a web designer—three electrical students, a deaf teacher in APD’s electrical program, and a deaf community based rehabilitation

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<sup>5</sup> For highly educated deaf young adults, however, there have been some opportunities within this sector. This summer, I met deaf young adults who were working as programmers for Dell, Infosys, and Microsoft, accountants for Infosys, and graphic designers. For the most part, these people came from upper class families and have university degrees.

teacher from a rural village in Karnataka State. There was an eighth delegate but because her family was concerned that she would be out late and because the sponsoring American organization had not sent any information out, she was not allowed to participate. During the program, the group held a day long workshop/exchange on problems facing the deaf in India and the goal was to brainstorm and problem solve solutions. It was interesting to observe the dynamics within this workshop as the American delegates were the ones mostly contributing the problems—lack of sign language interpreters, lack of closed captioning, no TTY phones, teachers who do not know sign language, and then, the proposed problem which was most interesting to me—the lack of a pan- Indian sign language. For the Indian delegation however, language diversity is a fact of life in India and they do not seem to view this as a problem. During the brainstorming session, the Americans encouraged the Indians to be empowered and to stand up for their rights—although they did not explain what empowerment means nor did they explain how exactly the Indians should do this. The culmination of these problem solving sessions was the performance of skits in which problems were miraculously and effortlessly solved. Throughout the seven day program, I interviewed both Indian and American delegates and I learned that the web designer was hoping to wrangle an American visa out of this program, that the electrical students and the APD CBR teacher very much enjoyed interacting with the Americans although they did not understand what the words empowerment or rights meant. They knew the signs/words but they did not know the concepts behind them—it was mimicry. They also told me flat out that they did not like the three computer training graduates. As such, it seemed to me that the program, for the deaf Indians, wound up being a seven day social program. In an

interview with one of the American coordinators, he told me that he found the deaf Indian girls to be extremely sheltered, that they could talk about their families, their schools, and their religions, but they did not have a sense of deaf culture. I asked him why he assumed that they would have such a sense and he responded that he believes that deaf culture is universal. My experience as a participant observer within this program helped me realize the following four things:

--When working internationally, one must be careful to not engage in the creation of a disability heaven versus disability hell binary—that is, America as disability or deaf heaven and India as disability hell. I am not advocating here for cultural relativism, rather, I am not so sure that making comparisons is the way to go. At the same time, I do think that there is something to be said for sharing experience and providing suggestions (and here I do wonder if there might be some way to argue for a deaf experience that is transnational or transcultural). For example, based upon my experience at deaf schools in America, I found APD's classrooms to be incredibly unfriendly to deaf people. Students sat in rows and there was extremely poor lighting. In addition, teachers stood before a window and as such, backlighting prevented the students from seeing the teachers' signs or reading their lips. I made suggestions about how to make the room more deaf friendly and I suggested a more circular seating arrangement as well as curtains to cover the windows. These suggestions were initially received with reluctance by APD's teachers who worried that the students' necks would hurt and they argued more or less that the students did not need to see their peers. Recently, I learned that APD has set up one classroom in the way that I recommended and that the students are extremely happy with this arrangement.

--It is important to ground empowerment programs within a concrete political and economic framework. In this case, it was not enough to merely talk about empowerment and rights but it was important to actually talk about how to obtain these rights as well as develop connections with key government offices and NGOs and advocates working in the field. Empowerment and rights mobilization cannot exist in a bubble or in language only. Empowerment must be relational and concrete.

--It is essential to develop concepts of human rights that are locally situated and salient. What I mean by this is that one should not assume that there is a universal experience of deafness or that all people share ideas of deaf culture. Again, this is not cultural relativism but rather it is an attempt to understand local practices and experiences of deafness in which deafness is not perceived as cultural or political but rather as an ethical issue. This requires that human rights workers and activists do their homework and understanding the complexities of what makes places different.

--One must always be aware of power differentials. What does it mean that these 8 Americans could fly to India to conduct this empowerment program and the Indian delegates will not be able to visit them? Similarly, can we fairly view this as an “exchange” and not a uni-directional flow of expertise from the American delegates to Indian delegates?

APD did not sponsor this program but it willingly served as a host for the opening and closing ceremonies and it offered the use of its van and facilities. At the current moment, APD does not currently conduct empowerment or leadership training with its students although the organization certainly seems open to doing so and it networks and works

closely with other NGOs which do provide such training. It is interesting to note that APD is being pushed by its funders to provide such training as this is what funders apparently like to see, according to funders at ActionAid India. It is arguably more sexy to provide a grant for a rights based empowerment workshop than for a workshop on computer assisted welding techniques. It should also be noted that APD enjoys a position within the political field of disability rights activism that can be considered apolitical. That is, APD works very closely with the Karnataka State government and it is extremely careful to not antagonize the state. It does not actively participate in any protests or anti-state political programs.

The following anecdote provides an insightful perspective into APD's positionality. Last year, the Karnataka State Disabled Peoples' Federation held a protest on World Disability Day, December 3rd. On this day, the Karnataka State government holds an annual public relations spectacle in which it sets up a tent on the Bangalore parade grounds and serves disabled people, who are bussed in, buns and juice. This is typically a media spectacle and the local papers always have photos of smiling disabled people the following day. The Karnataka State Disabled Peoples' Federation members and allies came to the parade grounds but refused buns and juice. Instead, they chanted, "no to buns and juice, yes to rights" or something to this effect. APD refused to support them although some of APD's students did join them and as such did not get their buns and juice. I am interested in seeing how APD may or may not change in the future and I also wonder too if it needs to change. Is it not acceptable for it to just provide good vocational training services? What

are its responsibilities in terms of providing rights based education and leadership training?

However, as a deaf person myself, and as someone who has benefited from rights based discourse, I personally think that providing such education is extremely important—especially for deaf people, who even if they benefit from elite family status and access to financial capital, are at a significant disadvantage as a result of the lack of access to easy communication. During interviews with disability rights leaders, these leaders expressed frustration about the marginal status of deaf people within the disability rights movement. According to them, deaf people rarely come out to protests and they do not seem to understand the issues. This is not a result of apathy or indifference but rather it is a result of substantial communication barriers. These barriers start in childhood when deaf children are trained in the oral method as the prevailing view in India is that all deaf children can learn to speak. Very few schools actually use total communication—a mixture of sign language and spoken language and those that claim that they are doing so are often not using a full and complete sign language. As a result, many of the deaf students in APD’s electrical and welding programs have not had access to a complete language. Some of these students cannot read properly in Kannada and as such, it is extremely difficult for them to understand something as abstract as “human rights”. This is one of the reasons why deaf people in India have not formed an activist bloc in the same ways that other disabled groups have done, most notably blind and orthopedically disabled groups.

What I have tried to do in this paper is to argue against deaf activists, Deaf Studies scholars, and (clueless) popular culture intellectuals like Thomas Friedman in their shared perspective on the emergence of transnational identity (and transnational capital). I have tried to do so through focusing on the particular conjuncture of deafness in Bangalore in which issues of class, gender, caste, and religion are also important. I also argue for the importance of a locally situated concept of “human rights” that makes sense to young deaf adults with low levels of literacy and education.

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Breivik, Jan-Kare. (2005). *Deaf Identities in the Making: Local Lives, Transnational Connections*. Washington: Gallaudet University Press.