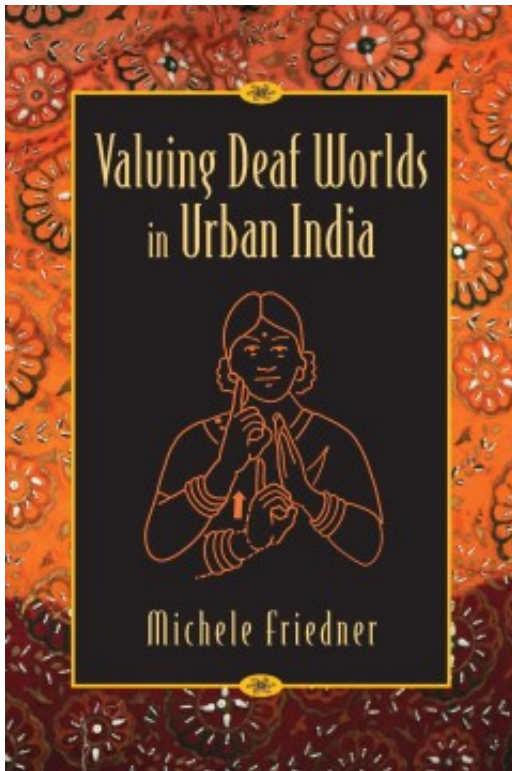


<http://somatosphere.net/2016/04/michele-friedners-valuing-deaf-worlds-in-urban-india.html>

Michele Friedner's "Valuing Deaf Worlds in Urban India"

2016-04-29 05:00:10

By Cassandra Hartblay



[Valuing Deaf Worlds in Urban India](#)

by [Michele Friedner](#)

Rutgers University Press, 2015, 216 pages

An Indian coffee shop franchise advertises their practice of hiring deaf baristas – “silent brewmasters” – to work their espresso machines. A Bangalore tech company boasts that it hires “physically challenged” workers only (118-121). Meanwhile, deaf adults in Bangalore complain that adult education at several non-profits is insufficient to really make a difference given disability stigma and the communication barriers that deaf adults face. What course of global events brought about a situation in which employing deaf workers constitutes a kind of value-making project

for corporate entities? In the multilingual world of 21st century Bangalore, what does it mean – socially, relationally, vocationally, personally – to be a deaf adult who signs to communicate?

Recent years have brought a new surge of ethnographic attention to disability as a global category, and to the social configurations and lived experiences of disability and disability stigma across global cultural contexts (for example, recent posts on this blog, including those by [Elizabeth Lewis](#) and [Seth Messinger](#)). Medical anthropology has hung its hat on the capacity of illness, disease, and practices of health and healing to at once illuminate and describe the broader social and political context, and, to center the voices of populations whose perspectives are rarely the focus of public discourse. Meanwhile, sensory ethnography and neuroanthropology have observed that bodily ways of knowing and coming to know are not nearly as stable as previous generations of social and behavioral science may have let on. What happens when ethnography values sensory difference as a starting point for inquiry?

Medical Anthropologist (and [Somatosphere contributor](#)) Michele Friedner's ethnographic account of the lives of lower-upper-middle-class deaf adults living in Bangalore, India finds multiplicity and confluence in several threads of theory and thought that have heretofore rarely been combined.

Friedner writes as a medical anthropologist, putting deaf studies and disability theory in conversation with a critical ethnography of the global neoliberal workplace. *Valuing Deaf Worlds in India* speaks to a range of disciplinary debates, from the anthropology of value (cf. [special issue of HAU](#)) to modernity to queer theory. This book, like others before it (e.g. Nakamura's [Deaf in Japan](#)), demonstrates that attention to deaf experience has implications for understanding broader social worlds. Often in anthropology, ethnography of deaf communities is approached with a linguistic anthropology commitment to examining signed languages; while this book attends to questions of languages, signed and spoken, Friedner instead makes use of stigma and disability theory. For the Somatosphere audience this work offers a sustained scholarly attention to sensory and bodily difference through ethnographic accounts of social experience. It culturally situates category of deafness as a global development discourse at play in corporate, NGO, governmental, and kinship settings in contemporary India.

Friedner offers several key theoretical innovations. Chiefly, she offers the phrase *deaf development*. Drawing on the multiplicity of discursive lives of the word "development" she posits a *deaf development* that finds confluence between the personal vocational, emotional, social, and spiritual development of deaf people, and the global economic

development rhetoric that circulates in Bangalore. Deaf people in Bangalore, she argues, look to ways to support other deaf people in becoming socially, morally, politically, and economically savvy. There is a focus on opportunities to create community and social value. She writes, “My deaf friends defined deaf development as the emergence of deaf-centered, and therefore sign-language-centered, structures and institutions that help deaf people develop language, educational, economic, social, and moral skills for living the world as both a member of deaf sociality and part of a larger normal world” (2). Throughout the text, she considers deaf development as both an ethnographically rooted local concept, and as an analytic and theoretical tool: what kinds of social opportunities make deaf development possible? How does development on a global political economic scale, find resonance through deaf experience with development as a concept in educational and rehabilitation settings? How is the project to modernity expressed through the production of a deaf identity?

Like many ethnographers with an interest in disability justice, Friedner finds that her own categories and political commitments are challenged by local paradigms. Her deaf interlocutors in Bangalore, unlike deaf colleagues in the US, describe themselves as *deaf*, and hearing people as *normal*. Friedner describes the sticky process of working with/in/through indigenous binaries, documenting how categories function, while at the same time maintaining her hold on a critique of normativity (12-14). She departs from the politics of capitalizing the word Deaf as a means of signifying a cultural group, and, following her interlocutors, uses *deafs* as a plural noun. In this way she centers the linguistic practices of interlocutors, while engaging the theory of deaf studies even as she avoids prescriptives for politically correct language.

Structure of the Text

In the introduction, Friedner describes her theoretical contribution, and introduces the reader to the core concerns of ethnography of deaf experience. She situates her interlocutors as mostly lower-middle to upper-middle class adults in their 20s and 30s, and describes the varied spoken languages in Bangalore and the uneven access that deaf adults have had to learning sign and participating in signing communities. She contrasts Bangalore-variety Indian Sign Language (BISL) with other Indian Sign Languages and with British Sign Language and American Sign Language (ASL). She situates signing in Bangalore vis-à-vis the competing histories of oral deaf education (in which deaf children are taught to read lips and speak but not to sign) with signed language education opportunities for children and adults in Bangalore (17; 29). Friedner describes her own positionality as a US citizen raised in an oral tradition who came to ASL later in life, and, in the field, acquire BISL as

part of her research (26).

In chapter one, Friedner focuses on the relationships of deaf adults in Bangalore with their families of origin. She describes the work of doing research in a variety of languages, and the dynamics of mis-communication that transpire between family members who sign a little or don't sign at all and their deaf adult children and siblings. It is in this context of elaborated near-communication, she argues, that deaf adults are motivated to take what she dubs a *deaf turn*, moving into a social identity articulated by relationships with other sign language users, and social opportunities that center signing as the primary and valued mode of communication.

In chapter two, she describes how churches in Bangalore are one of the core spaces of deaf sociality, and the historical engagement of religious institutions in deaf development in the region. In chapter three, circulation as vocation, she describes vocational training centers with programming for deaf adults as another of the key social spaces through which deaf adults circulate. However, she argues, deaf adults frequently move through these training programs without actual resulting employment, so that training becomes their vocation, with deaf adults enrolling in one training program after another, a perpetual process of deaf development that never arrives at completion. The NGO-organized trainings that Friedner describes will sound familiar to ethnographers who have investigated disability experience in a wide array of cultural settings. At best, the trainings really do lead to employment; at worst, they offer what interlocutors describe to Friedner as *half half half*, or incomplete and middling knowledge (contracted with the *deep knowledge* that Bangalore deaf young adults seek), yet offer opportunities for socializing and meeting people.

Bangalore is a key node in India's tech and IT industry. In chapter four, *Deaf Bodies, Corporate Bodies*, Friedner describes the various ways that Bangalore tech companies seek out and employ deaf workers. She relates the history of Indian legislation regarding hiring disabled workers, and the production of social discourses that situate deaf workers as offering "added value" to offices and companies, allegedly bringing diversity, loyalty, and specialized skills (106), and positive affective attachments or a sense of camaraderie (115-116). She relates the daily dynamics of a BISL deaf working group in one corporate IT office, and their strange status as symbolically accepted and integrated into the broader workplace, while comprising a distinct and linguistically separate working unit and social collective. Because of this dynamic, deaf workers were often treated as a uniform group by their hearing coworkers and by the corporation – even though, in reality, there was a great deal of variation in fluency and skill in BISL and in work skills amongst the group (111). Even where disability studies has observed that capitalist production has at once produced new

kinds of disablement, and produced a particular stigma for disabled people as unable to work, in fact, Friedner argues, there is a particular kind of value created when a company actively seeks to employ otherwise stigmatized deaf workers (121-123). In chapter five, Friedner describes a ubiquitous element of deaf social life in Bangalore, participation or recruitment for participation in multilevel marketing businesses (pyramid schemes) that are popular throughout India. These businesses offer a mode of potential distinction for deaf people seeking to build their social networks and theoretically to gain social skills; the goals of the business model, to meet more deaf people and to facilitate their joining the business, dovetail with notions of deaf development, offering both financial gain and social distinction.

Friedner's conclusion briefly revisits some of the individual anecdotes introduced earlier in the text, and poses questions about deaf futures. With new global recommendations in the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, and the trend toward valuing deaf workers that she documents, Friedner situates her ethnographic account as documenting one moment in time, a phase in deaf development.

Recommendations/Readership

Medical anthropologists will find this text compelling for academic study, and useful for undergraduate courses either read as whole or in excerpted chapters. It would be particularly useful to introduce a critical approach to global neoliberalisms at the same time that students will encounter critical deaf/disability studies. Those looking for an account of suffering, however, should look elsewhere: the disability advocacy politics of this book come through clearly – this is not “suffering porn” but rather a careful ethnographic account of how seemingly biological category – deafness – creates particular social realities. Friedner does not investigate “the poorest of the poor” (10), but rather those who have or seek jobs in government or corporate positions.

The text could be read in conversation with a variety of existing literature, from global ethnography of disability (e.g. Kohrman; Nakamura; Phillips; Ingstad and Whyte), to ethnography of contemporary India (e.g. Chua; Cohen), to ethnographic accounts of the 21st century tech workplace (e.g. Aneesh; Irani). At the core, the work examines how contemporary Indians produce themselves as modern subjects through education, sociality, language, and labor.

In *Valuing Deaf Worlds in Urban India* Friedner has crafted an ethnographic monograph that is at once a compelling narrative with vivid descriptions, and a carefully researched and powerfully structured theoretical assertion of how deaf identities are multiple, global, and

valuable.

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AMA citation

Hartblay C. Michele Friedner's "Valuing Deaf Worlds in Urban India". *Somatosphere*. 2016. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/2016/04/michele-friedners-valuing-deaf-worlds-in-urban-india.html>. Accessed May 19, 2016.

APA citation

Hartblay, Cassandra. (2016). *Michele Friedner's "Valuing Deaf Worlds in Urban India"*. Retrieved May 19, 2016, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/2016/04/michele-friedners-valuing-deaf-worlds-in-urban-india.html>

Chicago citation

Hartblay, Cassandra. 2016. Michele Friedner's "Valuing Deaf Worlds in Urban India". Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/2016/04/michele-friedners-valuing-deaf-worlds-in-urban-india.html> (accessed May 19, 2016).

Harvard citation

Hartblay, C 2016, *Michele Friedner's "Valuing Deaf Worlds in Urban India"*, Somatosphere. Retrieved May 19, 2016, from <<http://somatosphere.net/2016/04/michele-friedners-valuing-deaf-worlds-in-urban-india.html>>

MLA citation

Hartblay, Cassandra. "Michele Friedner's "Valuing Deaf Worlds in Urban India"." 29 Apr. 2016. Somatosphere. Accessed 19 May. 2016.<<http://somatosphere.net/2016/04/michele-friedners-valuing-deaf-worlds-in-urban-india.html>>