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Deaf on the Lifeline of Mumbai

Ajay and I walk quickly to Mulund train station. Masses of people are walking fast toward the enormous gate, all keeping the same steady pace. On both sides of the road are small shops and street vendors selling fresh fruits and vegetables. Men in suits and women in smart colorful saris or salwar kameez, all wearing sandals to wade through the fresh rain puddles, surround us. Here and there are groups of children in school uniforms. Arriving at the train station we see beggars, shoeshine boys, stray dogs, and homeless people mixing with these working people from different castes, classes, and religions. We walk to the right platform and head for the signboard that says "Reserved for Handicapped," where we will wait for the train. (field notes, May 2007)

An ethnographic research study that I conducted in Mumbai reveals that Deaf people tend to travel in specific train compartments that are reserved for people with disabilities.[1,2] This article explores the reasons they do so and sheds light on several sociocultural consequences of this practice.

Lefebvre (1991), in his well-known work, *The Production of Space,* criticizes anthropologists for having largely ignored the "concrete reality" of "spatial practices" and argues that everyday life deserves much deeper analysis. It is through these everyday "spatial practices" by real people living real lives that space is produced, used, performed, appropriated, and mastered. People use spaces in different ways to do a variety of things (working, relaxing, talking, learning, etc.), and their spatial practices exhibit continuity and some degree of cohesion.

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These practices are empirically observable and are neither determined by urban or ecological systems nor adapted to economic or political systems. In spatial practices the reproduction of social relations is predominant. "Social practice," however, is not the same as spatial practice, inasmuch as "spatial practice consists in a projection onto a (spatial) field of all aspects, elements and moments of social practice" (ibid., 8).

Lefebvre's criticism that traditional research ignores spatial practices also seems to hold true for a large part of the research on Deaf realities. Such studies have often been presented as if life for Deaf people is a kind of dual reality consisting of a problematic life with access problems within the hearing world on the one hand and accessible communication and interaction within the Deaf community on the other (see, for example, Padden and Humphries 1988; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996; Mindess 2006; Ladd 2003). Such studies have provided a deeper understanding of the dynamics in these communities. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the *everyday creative and strategic ways* in which Deaf people navigate through variable (often urban) realities and the social contacts they experience in doing so.

Linked to Lefebvre's call for research into "spatial practices" and the social interactions that take place in them are questions about how Deaf people move through their daily life environments, for example, in this multilingual and multicultural non-Western city that is Mumbai, the busiest and most densely populated city in India. How do Deaf people use their capacities and creativeness to cope with and communicate in their encounters with different hearing people in various locations, and how, when, and where do they create "Deaf spaces" in their city? My interest in this arose when two Deaf Mumbaikers took me in tow after an international youth conference for deaf people in Kolhapur (West India) in 2006. Their movements and interactions in the city fascinated me, and the idea for the research I describe in this article started to take shape.

While my research was initially aimed at investigating the spatial practices of Mumbai Deaf people in general, it proved to be of interest to focus on one *specific* strand of spatial practices: those that involved the main means of commuting in Mumbai, namely, the suburban

trains. These overcrowded train lines—called "the lifeline of Mumbai"—attract global attention, as illustrated by the 2007 BBC4 documentary *Bombay Railway*. For the past eight years or so, Deaf people have been putting their own visible stamp on everyday commuting.

Methodology of the Ethnography

I felt that my research on urban Deaf peoples' spatial practices would be best investigated by "the heart and the central method of anthropology" (Robben and Sluka 2007): the principle of "being there," doing participant observation. Due to time constraints, the narrow focus of a master's-level thesis, and the particularities of my fieldwork site, a megacity, I decided that a case study would be the most appropriate and feasible method.

For six weeks in 2007, I conducted participant observation in the daily lives of Rohan and Ajay,[3] two Deaf brothers with Deaf parents. They are middle-class Hindus from the Brahmin[4] caste in a Maharashtrian family.[5] At the time of the research, Ajay was thirty-two years old, and Rohan was twenty-nine. I selected these two brothers as participants for my case study because of their central position in the Mumbai Deaf community, which allowed me to also develop a broader background picture of Mumbai Deaf life. Although neither brother is a regular attendee of Deaf clubs, both are very well known in the Mumbai Deaf community. At the moment of my research they were employed in institutes that provide Indian Sign Language (ISL) training and training in English literacy for Deaf people.

During my investigation I resided in the small apartment where Rohan and his Deaf parents live in a suburb in the north of Mumbai. Ajay and his family lived nearby and visited Ajay's parents' home every day. I accompanied the two brothers while they traveled around Mumbai on both public and private transport, mainly trains but also buses, taxis, and rickshaws. They took me to food establishments, different kinds of shops, the homes of their extended families, and their workplaces. I kept methodological, descriptive, informative, and analytic field notes (Bernard 2006). To further investigate the patterns I was discerning, I made use of ethnographic strategies such as respondent validation and triangulation of the data and my

interpretations (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Even in the first week of my research it was clear that my informants' social and spatial practices in the train and at the train stations deserved further investigation and would tell me more about the general Mumbai Deaf community's spatial practices.[7]

Like my research subjects, I am Deaf, and although I have been through the mainstream experience and am no native signer, at this point I am a rather fluent signer. Communication during the research initially took place in a pidgin of International Sign and Indian Sign Language, but near the end of the study I had become acquainted with the research participants' signing styles, and I was able to understand them when they were signing to me in Indian Sign Language. To supplement the data gathered through participant observation, I conducted several semistructured ethnographic interviews in the last two weeks of the investigation, which I recorded on video camera and translated from Indian Sign Language into written English. The aim was to elicit both explanations of observed situations in the participants' own words and their opinions and clarifications of particular themes. In other words, it is not the case that the interviews guided the observations and the analysis but rather the other way around.

It was a challenge to arrange the data from these different sources into a coherent whole. I start with some necessary background information on Mumbai's geography and transport systems and the suburban trains' spatial organization.

The Lifeline of Mumbai

Although Delhi is the capital of India, Mumbai is its commercial and financial center. The city is home to eighteen million people, and together with Tokyo, Mexico City, New York, and São Paulo it is one of the world's five most populous megacities (Vreeken 2006).[8]

As these eighteen million people live on a small peninsula, the density of the city is no less than thirty-four thousand people per square kilometer (Tate Modern 2007). The southern tip of this thin stretch of land, called Mumbai Island, contains the central business district, where most of the jobs are located (Tiwari and Kawakami 2001); thus,

many people need to commute to and from this part of the city every day. This leads to enormous congestion.[9]

Pucher, Korattyswaroopam, and Ittyerah (2004) explain that most other Indian cities are more spread out and thus have lower density; moreover, their urban geography is often more polycentric (instead of linear, as in a peninsula), and they have a better road network. This is in contrast with Mumbai, where using a car or a bus is inconvenient, and unlike Delhi and Kolkata, Mumbai does not yet have a metro system. A comparison with buses and rickshaws—with regard to frequency, punctuality, duration of trip, and cost—shows us that the train lines are by far the best means of transport in Mumbai (Tiwari and Kawakami 2001). Pucher et al. (2004) state that 58 percent of the commuters who use public transportation in Mumbai go by train. This is in contrast to other cities in India, where buses carry more than 90 percent of travelers (ibid.).

The suburban train system in Mumbai is the oldest and most extensive in Asia, established by the British colonizers in 1853 (Acharya 2000). Currently twenty-five hundred trains a day travel along two lines every few minutes (ibid.). According to Mehta (2004), more than 6 million people use the suburban trains every day in Mumbai, with 1.2 million traveling in the morning peak hours (Vreeken 2006), which makes it the largest "peak" in the world in terms of the number of commuters (Acharya 2000). During the rush hours, 4,500 people travel on a single train packed far above the maximum capacity:

> On suburban rail lines in Mumbai, peak hour trains must carry more than twice their maximum design capacity, leading to inhuman traveling conditions, with so-called "super dense crush loads" of 14 to 16 standing passengers per square meter of floor space. . . . On peak hour trains, many passengers are forced to hang out doors and windows or to ride between train cars or even hang on the outsides of cars. (Pucher et al. 2004, 100)

The morning peak lasts until around 11 AM, and in the evening, the trains are extremely densely packed from 5 until 9 PM. As a result, "peak hour" lasts about seven hours a day within Mumbai city. The situation seems insane but in fact is a daily routine. The discomfort is something that people just accept, as the train is still the best trans-

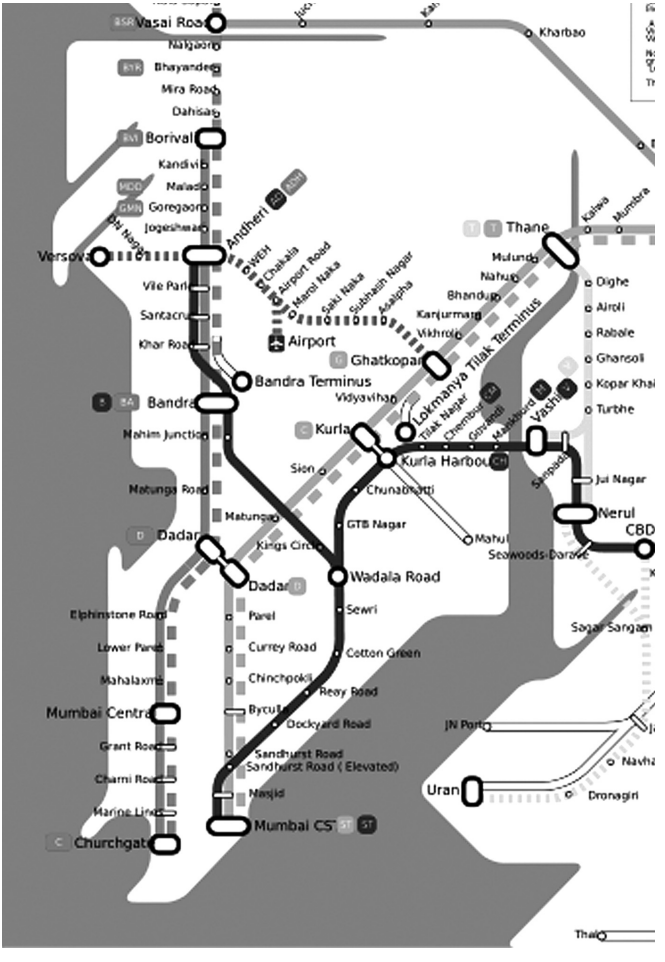

FIGURE 1. Mumbai's train lines. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

portation in Mumbai. Ajay concludes that "The train is Bombay's *lifeline*. It is really the lifeline of Bombay. If at some point the train stops working, everything collapses."[10]

The Trains' Spatial Organization

The most important lines operating in Mumbai are the Western and Central railways (see figure 1). Churchgate and Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST), the main train stations, are located at the tip of the

Figure 2. A row of rush-hour commuters in Dadar, waiting for the train. (Picture taken by author, June 2007.)

peninsula, Mumbai's city center. On these lines operate two types of passenger trains: a shorter (nine-car) and a longer (twelve-car) type. Twelve-car trains are newer and run mainly during the rush hours. As figure 3 shows, the trains are divided into several smaller and larger compartments: general, ladies, first class (ladies or general), "handicapped," and luggage compartments.[11] This setup is largely the same for all of the trains.

The general sections are in fact open to everyone with a valid ticket, but during the rush hours, at the time of the "super dense crush loads," only men use them. Separate compartments for women have been around for quite a long time, and their number has grown, just as the trains have increased in length as a whole. Four times a day there

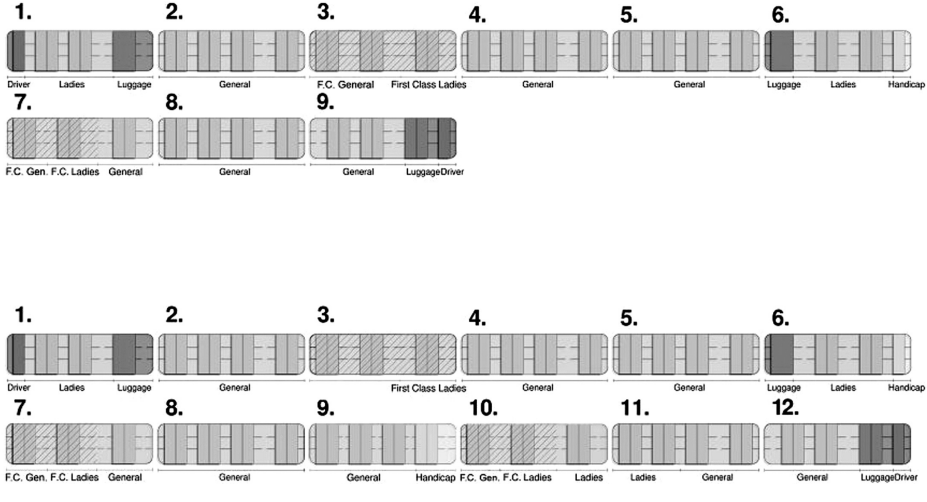

Figure 3. Spatial organization of a nine-car and a twelve-car train.

is even a train for "ladies only."[12] Many women have a job and thus travel by this form of public transportation when it is neither comfortable nor safe to join the crush of men (Vreeken 2006).

People with disabilities also have their own compartments, and it was these that were of special interest to me. According to Rohan and Ajay, these have been in existence only since around 2001. As figure 4 shows, there is one small section for people with disabilities (= the "handicapped") in a nine-car train and both a small and a large one in twelve-car trains.[13] I estimate the size of the small ones at about 1½ by 3 meters (where more than half of the space is taken up by a broad bench) and the larger ones at 5 by 3 meters.

Accommodation in these compartments is not cheaper than in the others, and passengers have to be able to prove their disability with a medical document upon request. However, for people with disabilities (and currently also cancer patients), they offer better access, more space, and therefore more comfort than the other, dangerously crowded parts of the train, something that is maintained through a strong and consistent social control. When fully able-bodied-looking people try to enter these compartments, the other travelers immediately ask them to leave.

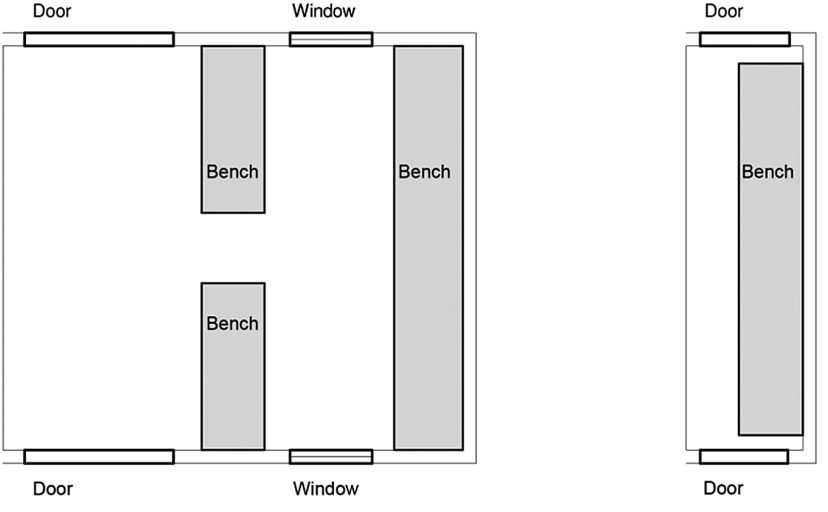

FIGURE 4. Left: inside of a large handicapped compartment in a twelve-car train. Right: inside of a small handicapped compartment in nine-car or twelve-car trains.

Figure 5. Sign on handicapped compartment. (Picture taken by author, June 2007.)

The sign displaying a wheelchair (figure 5) is quite ironic because in fact there is precious little space for even a folded wheelchair in the small compartments, and one climbs aboard the train by ascending a huge step in the very short stop time of fourteen seconds (Vreeken 2006). Most of the passengers in these compartments have "light" disabilities (e.g., a limp, a deformed body part) and are commuting to and from their jobs. Although mostly men occupy these sections, a few women do as well, and occasionally a child can be seen, often supporting a blind person. In addition, many Deaf people—who in fact have no bodily impairments that preclude their standing or sitting in the crowded parts of the train—travel in the handicapped compartment.

Deaf People on the Lifeline

Following calculations about the Indian deaf population in Zeshan and Panda (2005), I estimate that Mumbai's deaf population comprises at least 216,000 deaf and hard of hearing people, of whom 66,600 are actual Indian Sign Language users.[14] Many of them travel by train every day, and a number of them—among which my research participants—make use of the handicapped compartments. Rohan told me about his

initial attitude toward commuting in these compartments, which, as mentioned before, have been available only since 2001:

> I felt bad in the beginning. I felt I wanted to avoid the handicapped compartment because when I would get in, all eyes would be on me because my body is normal. I'm only deaf and saw that other ones were cripples. I felt that I would not be accepted there. So I still went back and forth to college in the crowded general compartments. However, deaf people whom I met urged me to come to the handicapped part. I felt suspicious: the handicapped part? However, I went with the group, feeling cautious and careful. Normally I would not go there, so I felt frightened because it felt wrong, as my body is not handicapped. I'm strong, so why go there?[15]

This is perhaps the first reaction of many other Deaf people as well since the purpose of these compartments is to enable people with difficulties to enter and travel more comfortably. However, this initial reaction is countered by the train's daily reality. Rohan continued:

> Later I understood that it is good for deaf people! The deaf can sign there freely! I felt communication was better there! In the general compartments it was so crowded that when there was a deaf person with you, you could sign only small signs above people's heads. Now I feel free. I have space to communicate. The general compartments are bad; it is tedious: standing in the crowd for one hour and holding the bar and feeling bored. Hearing people can chat with each other. Your head is the only thing that can move and is pushed, too: Deaf people cannot communicate that way. . . . I do not feel safe there. In the handicapped compartment I feel safe, and I can manage there, using space.

Deaf Spaces in the Handicapped Compartment

While in the past Deaf people largely commuted individually, spread out over the general compartments, they have begun encountering each other in the somewhat less crowded handicapped compartments. After all, there are only one or two of these areas per train. Encounters occurred not only between Deaf people who already knew each other but also between unacquainted persons. Rohan explains:

> If there was no handicapped section and the deaf would travel individually, a deaf person would meet a new person only sporadically,

> but because of this section, deaf people meet each other very often, so they get to know each other. . . . In the space of the handicapped compartment you see another [deaf] person and ask him who he is. On the road this doesn't happen; you walk past each other, and you don't know that the other is deaf, too.

In using space to communicate, Deaf people are different from the numerous other language minorities using the Mumbai trains. Moreover, they are different from (other) people with disabilities who also need more room, though not to communicate. In doing so, Deaf people are setting up "Deaf spaces," to use Gulliver's (2005, 2006) wording. Gulliver, proposing the new domain "Deaf geography," argues that Deaf people inhabit the same spaces as hearing people when working, eating, drinking, shopping, and so on but that they also create special spaces most hearing people do not: visual sign language spaces, where more than mere communication takes place. Over time, originating from the systematic existence of such spaces, Deaf communities with their own cultural behavior have been created: The visual communication spaces have become "Deaf spaces."

To return to the Deaf spaces in the Mumbai trains, figure 6 shows a possible setup of people in both a large and a small handicapped

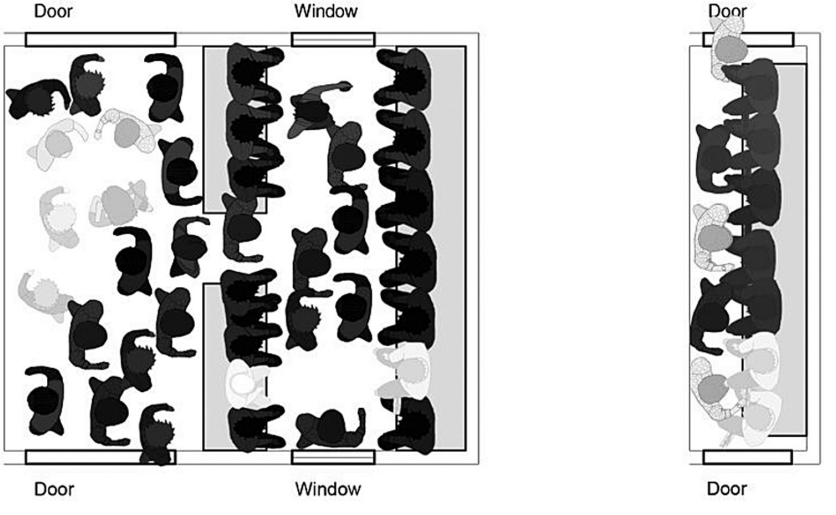

Figure 6. Left: inside a large handicapped compartment. Right: inside a small handicapped compartment.

compartment.[16] The black icons represent hearing people with disabilities, and the gray ones represent deaf people.

On the right of figure 6 is a typical spatial organization of Deaf people in the small compartments. When the "Deaf spaces" there consist of more than two Deaf people, these communicative spaces tend to be spread over the very limited overall area of the compartment, often mixed with the hearing people present and signing at each other across these people.

Deaf people's spatial organization in the large compartments, on the other hand, can take several forms. During a quieter hour, for example, a group of about ten Deaf people can be scattered about in a nearly empty compartment, using almost the whole area to set up a large circular or rectangular Deaf space. During busier times, the situation is different: The left-hand drawing in figure 6 depicts a typical situation that I noticed at a certain moment during the evening rush hour. Ajay, two other Deaf people, and I stood in a circle in the "hall" near the gate for the train door. Two other Deaf people sat on benches. A seventh Deaf person stood behind our group, watching our conversation without participating. The other people in the compartment were hearing people in work suit or uniform, most of them with a disabled leg. One of them—who knew sign—joined our group, stared at us for a while, and attempted to chat with me. There was also communication between the Deaf people in the group and the two on benches about the marriage of yet another Deaf person. However, Deaf people in the trains do not need to talk to each other all the time. Sometimes it is just enough to acknowledge each other's existence through brief eye contact.

Deaf Spaces on the Platforms

> *After his work, Rohan and I catch a train with a small handicapped section in which we by chance meet two other Deaf men, and they start an animated discussion. When the train stops in Kurla, one of the Deaf people suddenly leaves the train. He had seen a group of his Deaf friends standing at the platform and will catch a later train together with them. (field notes, June 2007)*

This fieldwork excerpt not only illustrates an accidental meeting with Deaf people in the handicapped compartment but also suggests another

Figure 7. Typical signboard "Reserved for Handicapped" on the platform in Mulund. Picture taken by my author, June 2007.)

important and unexpected consequence of the existence of these compartments: the emergence of signing groups on the platforms. Deaf people gather under the "wheelchair" signboard (as in figure 7), where people wait to board the handicapped compartment, to catch their train, or to carry on talking with each other after leaving the train.

Because trains come and go every few minutes, a larger Deaf group of five to ten can grow at such spots, and these people may spend about an hour talking after work until they leave for home. This happens at several train stations during the evening rush hour, around seven PM, mainly in larger stations such as Dadar or Kurla but also in Mulund. Rohan told me the following:

> In the past there was only one [such group], in Ghatkopar; there was one central deaf group. Later, when the handicapped compartments started, new deaf people came in that group and said [for example]: "Why should we meet each other so far away. . . . Mulund is better, here at home." There started such a group in Mulund, and more deaf did the same, they didn't go all that way to Ghatkopar but formed groups in other places. Now there are groups all over the train line.

"Easy to Meet Each Other"

It is now easier for deaf people to plan to meet each other, as Ajay explains:

> If you want to meet a person, and I don't mean just sending text messages all the time but meet him in person, you can just catch the train at a particular time [boarding in the handicapped compartment] and talk there, and when talking is finished you just go home. You save time, you don't have to go to each other's home. . . . We are now more *like a family,* and it's easy to get together, easy to meet each other, thanks to the handicapped section. Thank you, handicapped compartment. (smiles)

So, as many people have to travel in the same directions (e.g., back and forth to and from the southern tip of Mumbai), you can easily catch a train together. If you and your friends board at different stations, and you know about what time they catch the train, you can let several trains go by, waiting at the wheelchair sign (figure 7) and scanning the handicapped compartment of each train for them.

Meeting each other on the trains and platforms is facilitated by the use of mobile phones. Often Rohan, Ajay, and I met each other at the train stations after arranging a meeting by text message. According to Rohan, more and more Deaf people have bought a mobile phone in the last five years and now text each other in English, a development further facilitated by the arrangement of English literacy courses for Deaf people in Mumbai.[17]

"The Train Helps So Much"

Because those who meet each other on the trains and at the stations often come from different areas of Mumbai, they have attended different schools and clubs and thus use a number of sign variants. I asked Ajay to reflect on the effect of the train-related meetings on Mumbai's Deaf community. He replied:

> The deaf world in Bombay is closer now, like a family. . . . That's it. . . . In the past, when deaf finished school . . . if they finished their school career, they joined different deaf friendship groups, they met at home or went out for journeys, to enjoy together. So they met

> each other at home. Now not anymore—you know—there is the train timetable, they all meet at the stations, and after they have had their talking and sharing, they all leave to different directions. The train thus helps so much. (laughs)

As Deaf people now have fixed meeting places during their daily commute—the handicapped signboards or train compartments—they do not need to go to each other's homes in order to get together. Rohan mentions another benefit of meeting at the stations, as opposed to visiting people at their home: "It is not that easy to go to each other's homes. This is problematic because most deaf people's families are hearing, so if deaf people go to each other's home, it is. . . . You better go elsewhere. . . . I feel you better go out. Then you are free. The hearing feel bothered, so you better go out. Then it's easy to talk for hours."[18]

A question that then arises is whether visits to Deaf clubs, for example, have also changed as a result of the train meetings. What is particular for Deaf meetings at public places such as the trains and train stations is that, when the Deaf people within the "Deaf space" leave, this Deaf space is no longer there. The dynamics differ in more permanent Deaf places, such as Deaf clubs. According to my research participants, there are about four big Deaf clubs and several smaller, local ones with different aims in Mumbai. Deaf clubs, associations, and organizations allow people to work cooperatively to organize events and so on and in so doing to engage in other kinds of social practices that are different from those in and around the trains. Nevertheless, Ajay and Rohan suggest that Deaf clubs in particular are not very popular in Mumbai, whereas, as Ajay's earlier quote suggests, the strength of the train stations lies in the fact that these are public places where many Deaf people cross each other's path every day.[19]

Where Are the Women?

At this point it is important to emphasize that my two research participants were both young, Deaf working men and that the developments described earlier account only for this section of the Mumbai Deaf population. Older Deaf people and children are not often seen in the handicapped compartments, certainly not during the rush hours.

Retired Deaf people have less reason to venture outside their suburb, and if they do, they prefer to travel during the off-peak hours. Most deaf children go to local schools—Mumbai has twenty-two (oral) deaf schools, none of which are residential. The trains are most heavily used by commuters traveling to and from their job or college classes.

More remarkable in that respect was the absence of working-age Deaf women in the handicapped compartments. Responding to my observation that we never met Deaf women there, Rohan told me that Deaf women travel less altogether: "Girls more often stay at home. . . . Boys can go out and enjoy things in groups; girls like to stay home." As for the girls and woman who *do* travel, Rohan explained that "although the ladies' compartments are as crowded as the general ones—women don't like the handicapped compartments—they travel in the compartments for women. When alone, they feel more at ease in the ladies' compartments."

I asked several young Deaf women whom I met at the brothers' workplaces about this, and they all confirmed Rohan's response. Although the handicapped compartments are equally accessible to both men and women, the people in them are mostly male, and most of the compartments are small. Stressing that the size of the compartment and the timing of travel matter, a young Deaf woman mentioned that she sometimes travels in a large handicapped compartment outside the rush hours.

This gender issue, however, is more complicated than a strict men-women division, where Deaf men are always traveling among people with disabilities and Deaf women sit or stand with other women. Traveling in the handicapped compartment can after all be a means of holding a Deaf mixed pair or group together when space allows, that is, either in a large handicapped compartment or, when it is a rather small group, in a small one.[20]

Furthermore, mixed Deaf groups can establish Deaf spaces in the *general* train compartments as well, which, during the rush hours, are used only by men but in fact are available to everyone. This means that males (except children) are not allowed in the women's compartments, but women can travel in the general compartments rather comfortably outside the rush hours when accompanied by a man. For example, one Sunday afternoon during a rather quiet hour, we were heading for

a Deaf event in Matunga with a mixed group of about ten Deaf people. We were all in a general compartment, as it was a nine-car train with only a small handicapped compartment. Otherwise, during a busier hour, a mixed Deaf group can break up by gender—the Deaf women traveling in the women's compartment, and the Deaf men in the handicapped or the general compartment.

In short, it is clear that identities as Deaf person and as woman intersect in different ways (Brueggemann and Burch 2006), and this is reflected by the Deaf women's choices to travel either among other women or with a mixed group of Deaf people in the general or handicapped compartments. Nevertheless, the signing groups that appear on the platforms after work mostly consist of Deaf men and only very occasionally contain one or two women.

Intermission: The Three Realms

Before presenting the rest of my data, I offer some theoretical background about the "three realms" that appear in public spaces. Lofland (1998) identifies three realms in urban spaces: the public, the parochial, and the private. She characterizes the public realm as a "world of strangers": "The city provides, on a permanent basis, an environment composed importantly of persons who are personally unknown to one another—composed importantly of *strangers"* (ibid., xi; my emphasis). Here, she does not mean "cultural strangers" or "foreigners" but simply those with whom one is not personally acquainted. The dominating relational form found then in the *private realm*—between partners and family members or close friends—is more intimate. Finally, people with whom one is acquainted, like colleagues, fellow students, neighbors, and people of the same ethnic background, constitute the communal relation form of the *parochial realm*.

The public realm is most often found in *public space* but does not necessarily correspond to it. For instance, a place or space where no one is present does not contain a realm. Furthermore, Lofland (ibid.) mentions that realms can be *"out of place,"* as when a group of neighbors, naturally *"at home"* when surrounded by parochial space (for example, in a neighborhood bar or at church), makes a trip. In a house the private realm is naturally at home, but it can also contain the parochial

realm (e.g., during a barbeque) or even the public realm (e.g., when giving a house tour to strangers). A public place like a park can also contain the private realm when a couple is enjoying the sun and the parochial realm when a group of classmates is playing football. Thus, these three realms are *social* territories that appear in *physical* spaces but are not *defined* by them.

The next step is to apply Lofland's frame to *public transport systems*. Soenen (2006b) uses Lofland's theory to analyze her fieldwork on the trams in Antwerp, the most widely used public transportation in this Belgian city. Public or semipublic space in general and public transport in particular can consist of all three realms:[21]

> The everyday life on the tram is a situation of "three in one." The tram forms a home for multiple spheres. But the three relational spheres are in a specific way connected to each other. The public realm forms the décor, the broader frame of the everyday life and is . . . the frame in which the other two realms can manifest themselves. (Soenen 2006a, 6)

The private realm is created when someone has a mobile phone conversation or when there is contact between family members, couples, and close friends who are traveling together. The parochial realm can appear when a group of colleagues or neighbors boards a tram or meets there. These two realms can plug in to the public realm, possibly changing its atmosphere (e.g., by becoming noisy or through a moment of contact). With regard to my own research, Deaf friends or acquaintances traveling together or meeting each other in the semipublic space of the handicapped compartments can be thought of as constituting the private or the parochial realm (depending on the relationships between the Deaf people).

When such a private or parochial group is large enough, it can "transform the character of a *substantial portion* of the [public] space within which it is located" (Lofland 1998, 13; emphasis in the original). When a larger group of Deaf people is in the handicapped compartment, the established Deaf space can be relatively dominating.

At the same time, according to Soenen (2006b), it is precisely the semipublic nature of public transportation that can lead to the emergence of certain kinds of social relationships, and it is also there that

people from different cultures can interact. Augé (2002) is correct in asserting that—to a certain extent—everybody is "alone" on public transport systems. On the Mumbai trains, the passengers are lost in their own thoughts: The carriages are crammed, but the atmosphere is resigned and calm, except during boarding. At the same time the public realm is often important because it is the only world in which there is room for others and in which *contact* is possible with people who are different from us (Soenen 2006a, 6).

In the next section I investigate what happens in the handicapped compartments between Deaf people and hearing (but otherwise disabled) people.

Interactions among Strangers in the Handicapped Compartment

Lofland (1998) focuses on social interactions—which we can equate with Lefebvre's "social practices"—in the public realm and lists several principles of interactions among strangers. These interactions are mostly unspoken and very limited in duration. People in the street, for example, react to each other's presence by making sure that they do not bump into each other or perhaps offering a seat on the bus to a newcomer. This is called *cooperative motility.*

Another principle is that of *civil inattention:* We treat others as if they are not there, but we briefly acknowledge each other visually (for example, by fleeting eye contact).[22] "Civil inattention," however, does not mean that people are not available for *restrained helpfulness* or that they are not requesting it: We give and ask for help with little things (e.g., inquiring about the time, giving directions, borrowing a newspaper, passing the salt in a restaurant, or helping a mother with a stroller to get on a bus). Soenen (2006b) has applied Lofland's analysis of "stranger interactions" on the Antwerpian trams and, in doing so, inspired me to do the same with regard to the Mumbai trains. People on the local Mumbai trains are continually interacting, often without words. They employ the principle of "civil inattention" when "ignoring" each other until someone asks which side one uses to get off of the train or until we make space for each other when boarding or leaving, all the while applying the principles of "restrained helpfulness" and "cooperative motility."

Lofland (1998) states that the principles of "civil inattention" and "civility toward diversity" can be broken in order to *insult* or offend a person who is "different" in some way. We can also break the civil inattention rule *to generate sociability,* and this is what particularly interested me in the frame of my research. Sometimes such encounters are nonverbal, consisting only of eye contact or facial expressions, but they can also crop up in informal conversations. Here is an example of what regularly happens in the handicapped compartments:

> *It is evening, and we are sitting in a small handicapped compartment. Next to us sits an old man wearing a white T-shirt and dirty old pants. He signs to us. His signs are simple but very natural. He and Rohan have a short conversation. He asks where we are heading. He asks whether the white lady [me] is deaf as well. He asks Rohan where I am from. Afterward I asked Rohan if he was acquainted with the man. He replied that he had never met him before. (field notes, June 2007)*

Indeed, in the handicapped compartments, which are frequented by Deaf people, hearing people are often exposed to signs, and small talk happens regularly. We very often met hearing people who were well able to have basic conversations with Deaf people. Different people communicate in various ways, using ISL signs, gestures, pantomime on one side and words in English, Hindi, or Marathi on the other. Such words can be communicated through ISL fingerspelling or "writing" with a finger on the palm of the hand or on the wall of the compartment. Ajay comments: "The phenomenon [of acquaintance with deaf people] is spreading. Now it's the case with many hearing people [in the handicapped compartment] that, if you meet them, they know how to deal with the situation. It is not direct awareness, but it is indirect awareness."

We might wonder why these commuters try to make contact with each other instead of silently waiting to get to their destination. In looking for explanations for this breaking of the "civil inattention rule," Lofland suggests several possible conditions:

> One condition is the presence in the public realm of *open persons:* individuals who because of subordinate (child, disabled) or occupational (policeman) status or because of situationally specific identities (fellow American in China) are seen as more available for an encounter

> than others. Another condition involves *open regions:* locales (for example, drinking establishments . . . city streets during carnival . . .) in which all the inhabitants are mutually accessible to one another. (Lofland 1998, 39; emphases in the original)

One possible explanation has to do with Lofland's condition of "open persons": Perhaps Deaf people are regarded either as subordinated or as fellow-disabled people (or both). Another is to perceive the handicapped compartments as "open regions." The space of these compartments is small and confined, and they are frequented by Deaf people, which contributes to (disabled) hearing peoples' acquaintance with Deaf people.

Ambiguity: Intercultural Learning and Conflicts

According to Soenen (2006b), trams in Antwerp, a multicultural city, serve as sites for "intercultural education." Through stranger interactions on the tram, passengers can learn about the life world of cultural others. Nevertheless, there is no guaranteed success for such exchanges because the learning goes hand in hand with people's stereotypes, intolerance, and prejudices (ibid.). This is also the case in the Mumbai trains. Ajay mentions that although there is more and more awareness of Deaf people, it varies: "Some handicapped people think that deaf people have low intelligence and are stupid, but others know how to get along with the deaf. Sometimes there is a clash between them: those who say that deaf are stupid and others who say that deaf are intelligent."

Conflicts happen mainly because Deaf people use *space,* and space is scarce in Mumbai trains. Rohan explains:

> Deaf use a lot of space by signing busily and excitedly. Hearing people don't like that, but some of them accept it. Others tell us: "Stop that, use less space, be quiet, be quiet." They don't like such busy signing behavior and want it to stop. The deaf people then just shrug their shoulders and go on signing animatedly to the hearing people who do accept their signing and urging the complainers to calm down.

Intolerance, prejudices, and ignorance are sometimes broken down by encounters that actually contribute to "intercultural learning" and acceptance. Rohan told me the following anecdote:

> Once I met a hearing person [in the handicapped compartment], and we started enjoying an animated conversation. Another hearing person was watching the conversation warily . . . before this conversation he had asked me to quiet down, to stop signing. When he saw that the other hearing person and I were friends, he kept silent. . . . He watched and was surprised that a deaf person and a hearing person communicated that way. He kept silent and left it at that. If *deaf* people are signing, the hearing person would ask us to stop, but when hearing people see a hearing person signing with a deaf person, the other hearing people accept it.

Another and more deeply rooted space-related kind of conflict includes the *presence* of Deaf people in the handicapped compartments: I have already mentioned the strong social control system. People without disabilities are immediately asked to leave, and I regularly saw Ajay and Rohan ask such people to sit elsewhere. However, Deaf people are sometimes mistrusted, although they are allowed to travel in the handicapped compartment when carrying proof of a medical condition. In Ajay's words, "Some hearing people [in the handicapped area] have doubts. They say that deaf people are bad and that they misuse the handicapped compartment." An important reason for such tension is that the handicapped compartments are very small and deaf people do not have actual bodily limits that prevent them from traveling in the crowded compartments. Rohan gives an example of a situation in which access was negotiated: "I went into a handicapped compartment, and someone told me to get out. I said that I am deaf, and he told me that I was not allowed there, that I had to get out. I argued: 'But I'm deaf!' and I was then allowed to stay."

Nevertheless, he also reports a sometimes very tense atmosphere between Deaf and hearing people:

> Suppose you are handicapped, and I am deaf, and I sit, and you, the handicapped, come in and want to sit and ask the deaf person to make room for him. The deaf person wonders why he has to get up; there are other handicapped people who can get up. If the person next to me is lame, I don't mind standing, but if that person only has a deformed hand, he does not need to sit; he has a normal body. Hearing people feel that deaf people are easier to communicate with, not the same as them: It is easy to gesture to a deaf person to get up. So deaf people feel harassed. The other person has only a de-

> formed hand, but our body is the same. I have a "deformed" ear; he, his deformed hand, so we are the same. So the handicapped get angry and fight with deaf. Once a group of three deaf fought. The police told them they were wrong traveling there [in the handicapped compartment] because their body is fine. Deaf are strong; they can fight [to enter the crowded general compartments], so they have to get out.[23]

It is interesting that Rohan here classifies himself as "handicapped" and therefore having the right to travel in the handicapped compartment. Usually he talks about "handicapped" versus "Deaf" or "hearing" versus "Deaf." Here he places himself in the same category as hearing people with light disabilities to negotiate his access to the handicapped compartment, while these otherwise disabled people do not readily admit him to this category because it decreases their own space. In addition, Rohan places his conception of "disability" in opposition to that of the police, which means that deaf people do not have the kind of disability that prevents them from traveling in the general compartments, something with which Rohan in fact agreed in another conversation. This shows that, to achieve their aims, Deaf, disabled, and nondisabled people flexibly and strategically negotiate the categories in which they are placed. Thus, when commenting on such conflicts, Rohan concludes the following: "But deaf people still go there [the handicapped compartment] and meet in groups. Still (he smiles) . . . some get caught, others just leave the issue. But deaf are not afraid of getting caught and just continue traveling there. I feel that that's correct: The deaf group must travel in the handicapped part." Ajay remarks: "Anything positive always has a negative side, too. I feel that there are negative aspects [of traveling in the handicapped compartments] but that these are only minimal."

Just like in the trams in Antwerp, the everyday contacts with cultural others are experimental and happen through trial and error, with hate and love, laughing and grumbling, avoidance and meeting. To mark this dynamic situation where different realms with various possible relationships are present, Soenen characterizes the people in the Antwerp trams as an ambiguous "light" community as opposed to "thick" communities:

> It is ambiguous because this form of community cannot be captured by the division between the same and other, stranger and host, us and them. In this light form of community we are neither the same nor the other. . . . Through an ephemeral contact the unknown other can be transformed into something more than "the other" but also something less than "the same." It is a shifting form of community that bypasses classic dichotomies. (Soenen 2006a, 8)

This is precisely what occurs in the handicapped compartments, where there is no strict division between hearing people and deaf people. The former learn how to communicate with Deaf people through trial and error, and perhaps some of those with disabilities never progress beyond fleeting relationships that involve asking which side to use when exiting the train—but even these people learn that Deaf people are individuals of normal intelligence commuting to their jobs and communicating in their own language. As Soenen (2006b) indicates, this a situation of *ambiguity.* This is of a higher order than mere *diversity* because ambiguity points to an *interplay* of different values and factors, whereas diversity is just about the *existence* of different elements next to each other, about "the mere presence of cultural others." According to Soenen (ibid.), it is just because of this situation of ambiguity—which can contain different realities—that "intercultural learning" is so effective: It is not a *goal* of traveling on the tram (or on the Mumbai trains), but it is a *side effect* that comes about over a longer period of time.

Soenen (2006a) mentions that not only are such relationships on the trams in Antwerp important to the individual, but the continuous succession of these minor interactions contributes to the social atmosphere in urban space as well. Such small-scale exchanges between Deaf and hearing people in the handicapped compartments have indeed led to larger-scale patterns of awareness and skills: Deaf and disabled people who have never met each other before are already acquainted with how to communicate with each other, as the fieldwork excerpt in the previous section illustrates.

Meanwhile in Wider Mumbai

This being said, we should not underestimate the "accessibility" of communication for Deaf people in public spaces in wider Mumbai. In

my observations in the city's restaurants and stores, I noticed that many hearing Mumbaikers have a broad, basic gesture vocabulary and were more skilled in pantomime than people in many Western countries. For this reason, Rohan described Mumbai as a "luxurious" place for Deaf people.

In other words, the Mumbai suburban train system is not situated in a vacuum. The general difference between contacts in stores and restaurants and those in the handicapped compartments seems to be mainly the fact that contacts and relationships in the latter are often more concentrated in space, more frequent in occurrence, more active, more effective, and also longer in duration.

In addition, to a certain (but lesser and more passive) extent, the growing awareness in the handicapped compartments also exists among hearing people who pass by the signing groups at the platforms. Rohan describes this as follows:

> There are those groups of deaf people . . . at the train stations, signing. Hearing people passing by see them sign. . . . Now this phenomenon has spread. In the past, it didn't. If there is no compartment for people with handicaps, deaf people won't meet. If there is a compartment for handicapped people, a signing group springs up when deaf people come out of the trains . . . People walking along them see them signing.

In other words, Deaf spaces have become more visible to hearing people. According to Rohan, this has a positive effect on those hearing people's understanding: "They understand . . . that it's just the way deaf communicate . . . In the past they really were so surprised when seeing that, staring an awful lot, but now they see it and just pass and continue on their way." Ajay adds: "It is not the case that . . . when hearing people see deaf people, they fully understand their culture. But also they are not surprised anymore. Now they think, 'Oh, it is just deaf people,' and they go on. That's it."

One can imagine that in Mumbai, where six million people use these two main railways every day and where many small Deaf groups are present mainly during the rush hours, this has created an enormous, basic awareness of Deaf people and their culture. Rohan emphasizes: "Whoever uses the train has an awareness. They *know* . . .

because most people use the train. . . . It means that awareness is spreading widely."

Conclusion

The following quote sums up what has happened with regard to the change in Deaf peoples' spatial practices after the provision of separate handicapped compartments on the suburban trains:

> Any change that has impact on the *organization* of space will modify the system of *spatial mobility.* In the same way, any modification of any type of flow of spatial mobility will influence the organization of space. On microsocial and individual levels, . . . many of the practices of the actors regarding the functioning and *changing of their collectivity* can, in fact, be interpreted in terms of behavior in the field of spatial mobility. The actors are *conditioned* to a certain extent by these systems, but not entirely: they can initiate *new practices*. (Bassand 1990, 80–81; my emphasis)

As a result of the provision of these handicapped compartments in 2001—a change in the *organization* of space—Deaf peoples' *spatial mobility* (or, in Lefebvre's words, spatial practices) changed as they started occupying these compartments while traveling. As I have explained, my informants' initial motivation for doing so was the available space. This eventually led to encounters with fellow Deaf people in these compartments and on the adjoining platform sections; as a result, Mumbai's Deaf community has grown closer.

Another unintentional effect is the wider spread of actively or passively acquired awareness among hearing people. The strengthening of ties in the parochial sphere of the Deaf community bolsters only the Mumbai Deaf community *itself.* However, both the intercultural and ambiguous contacts between Deaf and hearing people in the semipublic realm of the handicapped compartments and the visibility of signing groups at the platforms influence the degree of Deaf awareness among Mumbai's hearing population. Both consequences are *sociocultural,* and this corresponds with Lefebvre's claim that the (re)production of *social* relations is predominant in spatial practice. To link this to Bassand's quote once again, Deaf people are indeed, to a certain extent, *"conditioned"* or "led" by the spatial organization—the organi-

zation of the train compartments—organized by those in power. At the same time, they have also introduced *new phenomena* through their spatial practices.

We have seen that the train and platforms—where three different realms and several kinds of social relationships are present—have become important places for Mumbai's Deaf people. It is at this point that Lofland's theory about the realms becomes useful once again. While we can describe the Mumbai Deaf community as the parochial realm, which can appear in public spaces, the question arises as to whether we can call this the Deaf community *"out of place,"* as Lofland (1998) would likely do. Are the Deaf communities' "home territories" the *parochial spaces* of schools and clubs, even for people who do not frequent these places? The situation in Mumbai also prompts us to ask whether a Deaf community needs a "home territory" *at all,* or, as Gulliver (2006) wondered, can the Deaf community *itself* be a place in which Deaf people feel at home wherever they gather? Hence, a useful term to frame Deaf people's spatial practices in and around the Mumbai trains is "Deafhood," as such processes clearly go past the "traditional spaces" of Deaf culture.

This whole process happening on and around the trains can be considered in conjunction with other Deafhood processes taking place in wider Mumbai,[24] which have greatly accelerated since about 2001/2002. The hubs of this activity are the Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for the Hearing Handicapped (where Rohan works), which organizes ISL interpreter training and trains Deaf people to become ISL teachers, and the Ishara foundation (where Ajay works), which provides English literacy courses. Deaf people at the NIHH empower themselves and each other in teaching their own language, ISL, to hearing people (such as interpreters for and educators of deaf people). Deaf people at Ishara help themselves and each other to improve their English literacy in order to access higher education, the Internet, mobile phones, and so on. Mobile phones also enable Deaf people to connect more easily, for example, on the trains. An important medium in these Mumbai Deafhood processes is thus *language*—more specifically ISL and written English.

As I mention in the introduction, the way to discover such processes is to focus here on how Deaf people organize and develop their actual,

everyday life in a dynamic way—traveling around their cities and interacting with each other and with other residents. This ethnographic approach has allowed me to trace a new development—accepted as "normal" by the people being researched—and to see it as important. For Rohan and Ajay it was a new experience to reflect on the processes happening in and around the trains. Indeed, they told me that they had "never thought about it before" although they commute by train every day. It was because of my observations, remarks, and questions as a Western Deaf ethnographer that they started to think about the phenomenon and to put it into words. In this way this research account became a dialectic process among the three of us.

Either way, the local Mumbai trains are the "city on wheels" (Soenen 2006b) on which Deaf people have put their own impressive stamp. Ajay believes that this phenomenon is unique to Mumbai: "Maybe Bombay is the first in the world. I think nowhere is the same as here. I think that. Really I feel that the world doesn't have the same situation anywhere. Only in Bombay."

It is because of this megacity's restrained physical geography, its resulting population density, and the heavy use of suburban trains—in short because these trains are "the lifeline of Mumbai"—that the several effects of the compartments "reserved for handicapped" are so widespread among Deaf, as well as hearing, Mumbaikers.

Notes

1. Mumbai is also known as Bombay. The city was called "Bom Bahia" by Portuguese explorers in the sixteenth century, and from the seventeenth century on, with the British presence in the city, this was anglicized to "Bombay." Since 1995 the official name, however, has been the Marathi name "Mumbai," after the goddess Mumba (Wyckoff 2007).

2. I utilize the deaf/Deaf distinction, which is still prevalent in the literature on Deaf cultures, Deaf communities, and so on, in which "deaf" is a more general term referring to the condition of not hearing, while "Deaf" indicates those Deaf people who use a sign language and participate in a Deaf community (I thus do not adopt the "strong," politicized use of the term, where "Deaf" means "having and developing a strong Deaf identity"). First, I was hesitant to adopt this division because it tries to group together deaf people who have very diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, my research participants and the other deaf people I met—the people whom this

article discusses—in fact fit the "Deaf" definition suggested earlier as they are signing deaf people who participate in the Mumbai urban Deaf community. For this reason I adopted the use of "Deaf" in my theoretical sections. Where I use "deaf" instead of "Deaf," it is to include all—and thus not only signing—deaf people (e.g., "school for the deaf"). In quotes, furthermore, I use the small "d" because my participants just make the sign DEAF and do not explicitly distinguish between "deaf" and "Deaf."

3. These are pseudonyms chosen by the two participants.

4. This is the highest of the four Hindu castes. I make no further mention of castes because the Mumbai urban population in general and the Deaf community in particular consists of people of very different backgrounds with regard to castes, classes, and religions; thus, this distinction appeared to be largely irrelevant to the description of dynamics on the train and in the train stations. Moreover, the duration of my research was too short to acquire a deep understanding of caste-related dynamics.

5. The Maharashtrian culture and the Marathi language are found in the Maharashtra district, an area in West India.

6. See footnote 24 for more information on AJYNIHH and Ishara.

7. Another field of interest was the role of different languages (English, Indian Sign Language, and Marathi) and language modes (writing words or sentences, gesturing, signing, and talking) in different places and situations.

8. Megacities are urban areas where at least ten million people live, such as Mumbai, Kolkata (Calcutta), and Delhi.

9. No other city in the world has a car density like that of Mumbai with its seven hundred cars per square kilometer: Their average speed is 8–10 kph (Vreeken 2006).

10. In the translation of the interviews I note the sign for Mumbai as Bombay because the sign is based on a fingerspelled B, and my informants mouthed "Bombay" when making this sign. Although "Bombay" was changed to "Mumbai" in 1995, indeed many inhabitants of Mumbai still call their city "Bombay." This is also the reason the authors of two recent books (Mehta 2004 and Vreeken 2006) about life in Mumbai intentionally use the popular "Bombay" instead of the official name, Mumbai, in their titles.

11. I refer to the train compartments for people with disabilities as "handicapped compartment," "handicapped part," or "handicapped section." The term "handicapped" may be out of date and odd—the current accepted term in the United Kingdom and the United States is "disabled" or "people with disabilities"—but it is the actual term used on the train signs, which say "Reserved for Handicapped," and by my research participants, so I accept this name for these sections. When talking about *people* traveling in these compartments, however, I use the more commonly accepted "people with disabilities" unless the participants used different terminology.

12. However, the "handicapped compartments" in these ladies-only trains are also accessible to males with disabilities.

13. Sometimes variations appear: In some twelve-car trains, both compartments for people with handicaps are small. Furthermore, the handicapped compartments of some new nine-car trains are almost double the size of the large ones in the twelve-car trains. In the next few years this design is meant to replace the current one. Larger spaces are thus "reserved for handicapped" in the future.

14. Zeshan and Panda (2005) estimate that India has about 1 million profoundly deaf and 10 million hard of hearing people. By following their reasoning that in developing countries 2 out of every 1,000 people are deaf and 10 out of every 1,000 people are hard of hearing, we can calculate that Mumbai's population of 18 million people contains about 36,000 deaf and 180,000 hard of hearing people. They further report that about 60 percent of deaf people and 25 percent of hard-of-hearing people in Indian urban areas use Indian Sign Language, so of these 216,000 people, about 66,600 would be actual Indian Sign Language users.

15. As mentioned in the first footnote, I use the lowercase "deaf" to respect my participants' language use. There is no separate sign for uppercase "Deaf," so I translate their sign for "deaf" as "deaf." This does not specifically mean an audiological focus on deafness but is just a term to indicate deaf people in general.

16. On seeing the people in a small handicapped compartment one gets the impression that not much space is allotted to them. However, they have far more room there than in the other crowded compartments.

17. Ajay was the manager of very popular English literacy courses organized by the Ishara organization, and I accompanied him several times to his work. This is a recent development in bringing English literacy to Deaf people who often know only a local language like Marathi or who have a poor knowledge of English. Moreover, some of these Deaf students told me that one of the reasons they wanted to learn English was to use mobile phones. They told me that it is not possible to compose text messages in the Marathi script—only with a special program—and not everyone of the Mumbai Deaf community knows Marathi or has such a program. Nowadays Deaf people who know at least basic English can more easily arrange to meet through mobile phones.

18. He does not mean his own home, which is actually frequented by Deaf people: friends of his Deaf parents, his brother's friends, and his own.

19. I do not have specific information on Mumbai Deaf clubs and their clientele, as the scope of my research did not permit me to investigate this topic in greater depth.

20. Mostly such groups consist of only Deaf people, but I also regularly saw a particular hearing girl with Deaf parents travel in handicap with her

Deaf friends. I asked her whether she was never asked to leave this compartment as she is neither Deaf nor disabled. She signed, "It is allowed for people with handicaps to take 'an escort.' It gives benefit for me . . . so that I can travel with my friends," she smiled.

21. Unlike Lofland, who regards transport systems as public space, Soenen characterizes them as *semipublic* space. She mentions that the trams are *owned* space, where rules are in play, a collective space that is not entirely public. The transition from the public to the semipublic space is obvious, for example, when getting on a tram with a valid ticket (Soenen 2006b).

22. This is what Augé (1995) calls *asocial behavior* on public transport, but Lofland characterizes it instead as a social politeness principle.

23. Here Rohan means rather the opposite: that communication between Deaf and hearing people is more difficult than between hearing people and that hearing people may feel that they can easily boss Deaf people around because it is harder to argue when communication fails.

24. Because of the organization of formal training courses in and about ISL at the NIHH, new knowledge rendered by research on ISL is offered in accessible forms to both Deaf and hearing people. Also at the NIHH, the English literacy courses were started and then moved to a separate organization (Ishara). All of the ISL and English literacy teaching occurs in an exclusively signing environment where all of the teachers are Deaf. This creates a snowball effect in that some of the trained ISL/English teachers now train new teachers in turn. The philosophy seems to be that Deaf people have to strengthen themselves and their community (as in the Deafhood principle). The two developments listed earlier reinforce one another: Self-confidence and expertise in (teaching) sign language, together with improved English literacy skills, have given Deaf people the confidence to pursue further education in English. Furthermore, their awareness of ISL and the English courses taught in the "Deaf way" are important keys to helping deaf people travel with self-assurance through their city using sign, gestures, and written English. According to Baker (2006), Gandhi characterized English as an "intoxicating language": a language that the ruling elites used to preserve their power, thereby restricting the flourishing of other languages and cultures. On the other hand, English typically gives access to personal status, modernization, international communication, and the global economy. This is clearly the case in the Mumbai Deaf community, where English (as used on mobile phones and the Internet) not only is the written lingua franca of the Deaf community but also offers wider access to the hearing world (as with schooling and written communication).

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