

PART ONE

# Natural Sign and Natural Signers



## Deaf Theory

This chapter is about signing, but it begins with a request regarding written words. In late spring 2010 in Maunabudhuk, the village in eastern Nepal that was hosting a six-month Nepali Sign Language (NSL) class for deaf adults, staff members at the government health post painted information pertaining to mothers' and children's health on the outside walls of the building. In bright red letters the post warned that maternal vitamin and mineral deficiencies could cause babies to be born deaf or intellectually disabled. The Nepali word that I have represented in the previous sentence with the English word *deaf* is *lāto*, which means something like 'dumb' in both the senses of unintelligent and mute (and unfortunately I did not record the Nepali word that I have represented with the English phrase 'intellectually disabled').

Unsurprisingly, when Sagar Karki, the deaf NSL teacher with whom I worked closely, saw what had been written, he was upset. Like many NSL signers, Sagar considers *lāto* to be an insulting, inappropriate, and inaccurate way to refer to deaf people. Enlisting me to interpret, Sagar approached the staff and convinced them to paint over *lāto* and write *bahirā* instead, a word that more neutrally refers to someone who does not hear. His actions articulated with long-term efforts by deaf and disability leaders to replace derogatory spoken and written Nepali words for disabled people with neutral terminology. For the purposes of this chapter, Sagar's response to the word *lāto* offers an entry point into NSL signers' understandings of sociality, language, and communication—understandings that have shaped my own approach to understanding natural sign.<sup>1</sup>

NSL signers' theories arise from their experiences of being signers of a young language and also from their experiences of moving between NSL and natural sign, or between what I refer to as conventional and emergent language. While

common for NSL signers, and not radically dissimilar from those of many deaf signers elsewhere in the world, these experiences are unusual when compared with the unmarked subjects of social theory: hearing people who grow up using the language(s) of their communities. Bringing together the commitments of deaf studies and anthropology to recognizing the enormous debts that academic knowledge production owes to the intellectual labor of people with whom academics work, I think of NSL signers' insights as a kind of uncommon common-sense that deserves documentation and explication both in its own right and in relation to the theory-building it has helped me to produce.

The chapter begins with a section that briefly sketches the historical emergence of NSL and deaf society to provide context for NSL signers' (un)commonsense understandings of language and sociality. For NSL signers, both NSL itself and the ease of understanding and being understood that NSL makes possible are contingent historically, biographically, and in everyday life. These contingencies produce an experiential tension: NSL both is and is not necessary for deaf signers to engage in communicative sociality. This tension appears in the language's referential structure and in NSL signers' characterizations of natural sign. Exploring these terms and characterizations leads to analyzing deaf NSL signers' sense of their responsibilities toward other deaf people. I show that NSL signers identify how hearing people exclude deaf signers from communicative sociality not only because hearing people do not know NSL but also because they do not bother to use or understand natural sign. This lack of motivation and action both produces and is produced by the figure of deaf people as *lāto* to which Sagar objected. Finally, I describe ways of talking about deaf people in speech and sign; examine NSL signers' critiques of the word *lāto* and the attitudes and actions of people who use it; and analyze ambiguities in those critiques that point to the ethical and social labor that conventional language does for its users.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PRESENT

Community narratives ground NSL signers' collective history—the history of the emergence of NSL and deaf society—in the founding of Nepal's first permanent school for the deaf in 1966 (Sharma 2003; Green 2014c; Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016). In NSL the school is referred to with the sign NAXAL, the Kathmandu neighborhood where it is currently located, and I refer to it henceforth as Naxal or the Naxal school. From 1966 until 1988 the school adhered to a strict oralist philosophy (Joshi 1991; Prasad 2003): the use of sign was banned and students were required to learn speech and lip-reading. Acharya (1997:1, quoted in Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016:47), a former Naxal student, remembers that if students signed, “the teachers would scold us, hold our hands down, twist our ears, and pull our hair.” Neither the policy nor the teachers' actions, however, stopped the young deaf students from signing.

Years later, these signers would still recall meeting up for the pleasure of using their hands to talk. As Acharya (1997:4, quoted in Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016) describes: “When 1:00 came, the time for tiffin, the students could surreptitiously communicate through visual and gestural modalities. After 4:00 in the afternoon we were free to talk to each other using signs after leaving school. There was no particular reason to return home early if we did not have to, since we were not able to communicate effectively with our families. So we would gather in a specific place after school to socialize using sign language until 7 or 8 in the evening.” Another former student, slightly younger than Acharya, described the making of NSL to me in similar terms, mentioning the importance of both school and the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf (KAD), founded in 1980 by a group of former Naxal students and usually considered the first deaf-run association in the country.<sup>2</sup> I wrote in my fieldnotes: “There was the younger crowd of school boys, who weren’t allowed to sign and had to sign only on the sly—they’d set times and places after school and they would meet to let their hands go crazy, signing and signing. There was also the older crowd who founded the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf. As [my friend] told it, these two groups eventually merged, and with this merging came the formation of NSL.”<sup>3</sup>

According to deaf narratives, NSL grew out of the communicative interactions of several cohorts of deaf children and young adults who spent their days together at the Naxal school and later at KAD. Presumably, in the earlier years especially, they began by communicating in what today NSL signers call NATURAL-SIGN (Green 2014c). There is also evidence that one or more Nepali students had spent time in India learning Indian Sign Language (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016:47, citing Sharma 2003, and Arjun Shrestha, pers. comm.). Deaf schools often figure as the birthplace of a language and deaf community. As Padden (2011) argues, signing practices often already exist in the places where deaf schools are established *and* deaf schools bring together the critical mass of signers theorized as necessary for the emergence of signed languages. Friedner (2015) has theorized that deaf educational spaces give rise to and are cultivated as moral spaces where deaf people orient, and are encouraged to orient, toward each other. Bringing together Padden’s and Friedner’s work with the emphasis on attention and responsibility that NSL signers articulate, it becomes clear that deaf schools produce language not only because of the number of deaf people present but also because of their desire and willingness to make sense to and of each other.

In 1995 leaders from KAD and seven other regional deaf organizations formed what is now known as the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (abbreviated NDFN). Over the years the number of local deaf associations has steadily grown. In late 2010, NDFN had twenty-five member chapters; at the time of writing, the organization’s website states that there are fifty-three.<sup>4</sup> The growth of deaf-run institutions over the past few decades has both produced and been produced by growing numbers of educational facilities for the deaf. As of 2011,

at least 18 deaf schools and more than 125 deaf classes (within hearing schools) were operating in nearly all of Nepal's then-75 districts (Hundley 2011). The NSL term DEAF SCHOOL includes both schools and classes, and many deaf classes, like deaf schools, offer residential facilities and serve a similar—though differently scaled—function, bringing deaf children into the wider network of deaf NSL signers.<sup>5</sup>

At a program in 2006, NDFN's president at the time, Bikash Dangol, emphasized the importance of deaf schools. Addressing an audience of deaf activists, parents of deaf children, and hearing functionaries, he argued that establishing schools for the deaf is more urgent than establishing schools for the hearing, because hearing children who don't attend school still have a social education. From the perspective of deaf NSL signers, going to school is not only about acquiring skills such as Nepali, and increasingly English, literacy but also, and more fundamentally, about acquiring a conventional language and being part of deaf society. Deaf society includes and extends beyond schools; it is the always-growing network of (primarily) NSL signers who come together at formal and informal events, within and across particular places.<sup>6</sup>

During my fieldwork in Kathmandu, deaf people could be found every day of the week but Saturday at KAD. People would drop by not only for official business but also to spend time with their friends or catch up on news; organizations elsewhere, such as the Gandaki Association of the Deaf in Pokhara, serve a similar function. The ever-expanding Bakery Café chain offers another kind of “deaf space” (Gulliver 2006, cited in Kusters 2015), as it hires many deaf waiters, providing a steady paycheck for work done in the company of other signers, as well as facilitating interactions between deaf and hearing people (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2011b). District-level associations as well as the NDFN hold yearly meetings and cultural events such as dance performances and picnics, facilitate vocational training programs, and work with foreign NGOs, while deaf sports organizations coordinate games within the country and abroad. Outside of schools and other institutions, friends get together at homes and tea shops, in soccer fields and restaurants. They invite each other to celebrate birthdays, rice feedings, and weddings. Indeed, marriages between deaf sweethearts are now common. Deaf Nepalis have forged both durable spaces and iterative events in which they come together, on local, regional, national, and international levels. However, NSL signers do not claim that communicative sociality is *only* available in NSL.

### THREE LEVELS OF CONTINGENCY

Whereas users of Nepali, or for that matter natural sign, cannot point to a specific person and say, “That person helped make our language,” among NSL signers, doing this is not just possible but common. This is the first level on which NSL signers experience the contingency of NSL and deaf society. The oldest users of NSL—sometimes called the first cohorts or generations in scholarship on young

signed languages—are alive and known by other NSL signers, often through their positions as leaders in deaf organizations. Individuals' biographies constitute the second level of contingency. Unlike hearing people who learn spoken language from birth, many, perhaps most, deaf NSL signers can remember learning NSL. They often can point, rhetorically and literally, to people from whom they learned NSL, people whom they helped learn NSL, and/or people who helped them or whom they helped to access the spaces where they learned it.<sup>7</sup> For example, a decade after learning NSL at the age of sixteen, my friend Sommaya Lama continued to refer to the woman who had first taught her in precisely those terms. Relatedly, in NSL spaces people frequently asked me, "Who taught you NSL?" (In the United States, I am more likely to be asked *why* or *how* I learned ASL.) Even if the person questioning me did not immediately recognize the name of my first NSL teacher, the form of my response—my teacher's name, which I would usually offer first as a name sign and then sometimes fingerspell with the NSL alphabet—served to place me in a constellation of personal connections.

In an inverse of both the first and second levels, most if not all NSL signers personally know deaf adults who either do not know NSL at all or are learning it in the present: perhaps a deaf neighbor or older relative, whether someone from Kathmandu or someone who traveled there from a more rural area, where there are fewer deaf schools and organizations. As I argue in Green 2014c (35–39), NSL signers' characterizations of cities and villages reflect broader (hearing) tropes about development and space (Pigg 1996, 1992; Liechty 2003, 2001) but also reflect irreducibly deaf experiences of language- and locality-specific modes of sociality. It is unmistakable for NSL signers that things could have been different. Alternative histories are close by, embodied in persons.

In a 2012 interview, Prajwal Dangol, then in his mid-twenties, recalled how excited and disoriented he felt during his first day at Naxal, at the age of eight. He had previously attended an educational program for children with disabilities, but this was his first experience in a signing environment. During the interview Prajwal was sitting next to his former schoolmate, Furba Sherpa, who, Prajwal explained, had started school a year earlier and was repeating the same grade. He continued: "So I was new, and Furba was already a good signer, in fact he was the cleverest kid in class. And I didn't know sign. You know the posters with the NSL alphabet, those were up on the walls, and I just stood staring at them open-mouthed. Furba got my attention and showed me the signs for the letters. I kept looking, and tried to make those signs. I didn't know sign at all. I tried and tried and tried, and I did learn."<sup>8</sup> Prajwal relayed this story with his usual panache, depicting himself staring up at the posters with rapt attention. On the one hand, he told the story as if it were interesting but not remarkable, and indeed, learning conventional language at age eight is not especially unusual among deaf NSL signers. On the other hand, to return to a point made in the introduction, the principal assumptions around sociality and language made by the (hearing) social sciences—with the exception of deaf studies and allied fields—fail to account for such experiences.

In a different context Prajwal reflected further on the importance of (learning) NSL. Discussing with a friend why potential sweethearts should talk directly with each other, Prajwal asked the following question: “You’re deaf, I’m deaf, other people are deaf. Do we COMMUNICATE or miscommunicate [literally, MISS]?” Prajwal’s friend, also a young man then in his twenties, replied, “We communicate,” or more literally, “[Our communication] ALIGNS.” In response, Prajwal confirms, “Right, because of *SĀNKETIK BHĀSĀ* ‘SIGN LANGUAGE.’” His deployment of a question with an expected answer is a familiar and effective NSL rhetorical device. Its power relies on the response being predictable and uncontested: here, that deaf people communicate. Of course, deaf NSL signers sometimes do miscommunicate with each other, but this is beside the point, because it is *only* with other NSL signers that communication can ever be taken for granted.<sup>9</sup>

Prajwal’s claim leads to the third level of contingency. NSL signers’ communication aligns with other NSL signers’, not with everyone’s. In their everyday lives, however, deaf NSL signers must communicate with variously positioned deaf and hearing people; Graif (2018) also addresses this theme. My friend Sommaya, for example, used NSL with other NSL signers, and mixtures of speech, mouthing, lip-reading, and natural sign when we spent time visiting her parents in Nuwakot and with her sister with whom she lived in Kathmandu. I watched Prajwal charm hearing shopkeepers in natural sign and discuss family issues with his hearing mother in a mixture of NSL, natural sign, and mouthed Nepali and Newari words. In Maunabudhuk, Sagar shifted between signing NSL with me, using natural sign with both hearing and deaf people, writing Nepali with some of his hearing age-mates, and asking me to translate between NSL and spoken Nepali. While NSL signers communicate with people beyond deaf society, sometimes it MISSES and sometimes it ALIGNS.

Next, I discuss how NSL signers refer to and evaluate their own and others’ communicative practices and their efficacy, in various ways, depending on the contexts of both communication and evaluation. What I want to emphasize here is that these evaluations are grounded in lifelong, everyday experiences of moving between ways of communicating, calibrating (Moriarty and Kusters 2021) their communication to the specific needs of the situation and their interlocutors (Hiddinga and Crasborn 2011). NSL signers’ communicative practices in and across NSL, natural sign, and resources from spoken and written languages mean that deaf NSL signers experience and are keenly aware of an existential tension: conventions matter and communication outside of conventions is possible.

#### METASIGNS AND METALINGUISTIC DISCOURSE

This tension is reflected in the referential structure of key NSL metasigns (signs about signing) and in metalinguistic discourse about signing. Briefly put, the sign SIGN can refer to signing in general, including NSL and natural sign, and also more narrowly to NSL. Moreover, discursive characterizations of natural sign also convey a kind of ambivalence or multiplicity. NSL signers describe natural





FIGURE 2. The sign SIGN. A person's two open hands face each other and move toward and away from the chest in alternating circles. Illustration by Pratigya Shakya (NDFN 2003:17). Reproduced by permission from the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NDFN).

sign as restricted and restricting yet expansive, as “smaller than NSL” but also equivalent to it; as something (at least partly) learned from hearing people and as something that hearing people frequently can't be bothered to partake in.

### *Key Signs*

SIGN comprises an overarching category. Figure 2 shows an illustration by Pratigya Shakya of the sign SIGN; it appears in the NSL dictionary published and distributed by the NDFN that was nearly ubiquitous in NSL signers' homes during my fieldwork (NDFN 2003). SIGN encompasses NSL and natural sign and is also used when talking about foreign sign languages. In contrast, the signed phrase NEPALI SIGN LANGUAGE, as well as shorter versions like NEPALI SIGN or SIGN LANGUAGE, almost always refer specifically to what in this text I call NSL (as with Prajwal's quote earlier). And, as I discuss below, NSL signers refer to NSL most frequently with the sign SIGN.

The sign NATURAL-SIGN refers to communicative practices used by various types of people in various situations, including:

- deaf NSL signers when they communicate with deaf Nepalis who do not know NSL, with hearing Nepalis who do not know NSL, or with deaf or hearing foreigners who do not know NSL;



FIGURE 3. Furba Sherpa signs “NATURAL-SIGN”: the fingers of each hand touch the inside middle of each thumb; the hands move alternately toward and away from the chest, thumbs brushing as the hands pass each other. Illustration by Nanyi Jiang.

- deaf Nepalis who do not know NSL sign when they communicate with anyone, deaf or hearing;
- hearing Nepalis who do not know NSL when they communicate with deaf Nepalis, whether or not the deaf Nepalis know NSL; and
- hearing NSL signers when they communicate with deaf Nepalis who are not NSL signers.

Natural sign, then, refers to communication that occurs in the signed modality and that is not NSL or a foreign signed language. Figure 3 shows the sign NATURAL-SIGN, illustrated by Nanyi Jiang.<sup>10</sup>

The sign NATURAL-SIGN is an initialized sign; the handshape corresponds to the fingerspelled consonant with which the Nepali word *prakriti* ‘nature’ begins.

In different contexts the same sign could also be glossed *NATURE*, as in things like waterfalls and thunderstorms, or *ON-ONES-OWN*, as when talking about how someone learned a handicraft without instruction or the fact that someone had twins without using assistive reproductive technologies (this latter example is drawn from actual conversation and not meant as a judgment on what counts as “natural” in the realm of reproduction). This second meaning, which emphasizes that something was done (perhaps metaphorically) with one’s own hands, without formal instruction or intervention, resonates with how NSL signers characterize natural sign. In an interview I conducted with Sagar Karki, he defined natural sign like this: “*NATURAL-SIGN* is their own *LANGUAGE* that they’ve used their entire lives. Did they grow up going to school? They’ve never been in their lives. I’m teaching them now, but before, from the time their mothers gave birth to them, they would talk about things, using signs to say that the father had gone somewhere, gone outside. Their communication works. Krishna [a deaf man] and the other deaf people [in Maunabudhuk] grew up understanding this kind of sign. There were no [deaf] schools here then, people didn’t know about them.”<sup>11</sup>

This emphasis on natural sign as a mode deaf people use to communicate without formal instruction is especially relevant when placed in the context of NSL. While deaf NSL signers no doubt acquire NSL primarily through socialization with other NSL signers, every NSL signer I have ever met has also received formal instruction in NSL (or at least its vocabulary, as noted by Hoffmann-Dilloway 2008), whether at school or a deaf organization—the same places where less formal socialization occurs. In other words, regardless of the actual acquisition process, the socially remarked-on fact is that NSL is learned in the context of formal education, as in Prajwal’s description of the first time he encountered NSL. In the same interview he recalled having playful conversations in natural sign with his father and with elderly neighbors. Natural sign, then, is learned (and used) in homes and neighborhoods, in contrast to NSL.<sup>12</sup>

### *Categories and Characterizations*

The existence of the signed phrase *NEPALI SIGN LANGUAGE* and the sign *NATURAL-SIGN* makes clear that NSL signers distinguish between these modes of signing. Yet two factors produce a blurring of categories. First, what counts as an example of a given category is subject to social evaluation, as Hoffmann-Dilloway (2011a) shows with regards to natural signers learning NSL. Second, a single sign can refer to more than one category and several different signs can refer to the same category. In everyday conversation the phrase *NEPALI SIGN LANGUAGE* is not commonly employed; the sign *SIGN* usually refers to NSL and NSL is usually referred to with the sign *SIGN*. Yet a person who communicates in natural sign also might be described simply as using *SIGN*. For example, an NSL signer might answer affirmatively when asked if their parents *SIGN*, and then do so again

when asked if they mean their parents use NATURAL-SIGN. Similarly, Sagar used the sign SIGN almost exclusively when discussing signing that, when asked directly, he considered to be natural sign. The referent of SIGN may be identifiable through context or may remain ambiguous.

It is not only the one-to-many and many-to-one relationships between meta-signs and their referents that contribute to a sense of ambiguity about what exactly natural sign is or what functions it can(not) serve. NSL signers also implicitly and explicitly characterize natural sign both as perfectly adequate for communication—and with a broader range of people than NSL—and as imposing limits on communication. This framing of natural sign is similar to how Indian Sign Language users in Mumbai describe their use of “gesture” to communicate with hearing people (Kusters dir. 2015; Kusters and Sahasrabudhe 2018). NSL signers portray natural sign as having stable lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic properties and establish rhetorical equivalences between NSL and natural sign and between NSL signers and natural signers. At the same time, NSL signers distinguish between the communicative affordances of NSL and natural sign, and differentiate themselves from natural signers. Natural sign thus emerges as a mode of communication that is simultaneously, and contradictorily, powerful and limited/limiting.

In the aforementioned interview with Prajwal Dangol and Furba Sherpa, Furba compared lexical items used “here” by NSL signers in Kathmandu and “there” by natural signers in the Solu Khumbu region where he was born, calling the latter items both “their own” and “our own.” At one point I reminded him of an earlier, unrecorded conversation we had had about the sign SCHOOL as conventionally signed in Maunabudhuk and in his own village. Furba replied, “Yes. Here, [it is signed] SCHOOL; there [in Maunabudhuk, it is signed], SCHOOL; [and in Solu Khumbu, it is signed] SCHOOL.”<sup>13</sup> By reproducing the distinct lexical items used in Kathmandu and two other places, Furba accomplishes two things. By *not* mentioning that the sign that he produces for “here” is an NSL sign, he demonstrates the degree to which NSL is associated with particular places, such as Kathmandu. At the same time, this lack of mention, and the naming of different signs, sets up a metapragmatic correspondence between NSL and natural sign: that is to say, he represents both NSL and natural sign as communicative practices with stable, repeatable lexical items.

Similarly, several deaf teachers I spent time with explained how they would teach NSL to deaf people through the use of their students’ own natural signs. Sagar, for example, reported a conversation between himself and Krishna Gajmer, a deaf resident of Maunabudhuk. Each line includes a fairly literal gloss, followed by a more elaborated translation, with line breaks for ease of reading. The letter Q represents the general wh-question sign in natural sign (discussed more in chapter 3); the word “Point” is followed immediately by the person, place, or direction pointed to.

- 1 KRISHNA, HOUSE Q?  
I asked Krishna, "Where do you live?"
- 2 Point-downhill.  
He answered, "Downhill."
- 3 Point-Krishna Q? SACRED-THREAD?  
"And are you Bahun/Chhetri?"
- 4 BLACKSMITH.  
"No, I'm Kami."<sup>14</sup>

While in these reported utterances, each lexical sign Sagar produces is *also* an NSL sign, our preceding turns have framed the reported conversation as natural sign, a characterization that is reinforced by the formal and pragmatic features of Sagar's second question to Krishna about caste/ethnicity.<sup>15</sup> In NSL the conventional way of asking someone their *jāt* 'caste/ethnicity' is to sign, "JĀT WHAT? 'What's your caste/ethnic group?'" In natural sign, at least in Maunabudhuk, the conventional way to ask about someone's caste/ethnicity is to ask if someone is a particular *jāt*. This is done using a conventional naming strategy that draws on typified caste/ethnic practices such as blacksmithing, sewing, (not) drinking alcohol, (not) eating pork, or, as in this example, wearing a sacred thread (Green 2022b). In other words, in NSL a signer directly names the general category (JĀT) and requests that the addressee identify their particular caste/ethnic group. In natural sign a signer provides an example of the general category and requests that the addressee provide a confirmation or a correction.

Together, Furba and Sagar demonstrate that natural sign exhibits grammatical and pragmatic conventions, at least some of which vary by location. In doing so, they make an implicit claim that, like knowing/using NSL, knowing/using natural sign involves knowledge or skill. I have also seen NSL signers explain how they use natural sign to teach NSL or proudly describe giving tours to signers from other countries (remember that the category NATURAL-SIGN includes some forms of signing between signers who use different but conventional signed languages). Furthermore, I have seen and been told how NSL signers talk with their family members and neighbors using natural sign. For NSL signers, then, natural sign is powerful; in some senses it is more powerful than NSL in that it enables communication with a wide variety of people.

Relatedly, when I asked Furba if natural sign suffices for complete communication for a deaf person in his village who does not know NSL, he said yes. Yet in the same conversation, when I asked about the difference between NATURAL-SIGN and SIGN (interpreted by Furba to mean NSL, which is indeed how I meant it), he answered like this: "Previously, I didn't know that there are different kinds of sign. Natural sign arises, it's their [Solu Khumbu's] own, and I learned it myself according to what I saw. Later, when I was brought to Kathmandu, I came to understand that signing here is different, Kathmandu has its own signing. It's like the aim of



FIGURE 4. (a) Seated in a field next to Mara, Sagar signs “COMMUNICATION,” moving two open, curved “C” hands toward and away from his body in alternation. (b) Sagar signs “MISS,” moving extended index fingers toward and then past each other. Illustrations by Nanyi Jiang.

NSL is total and complete communication. Natural sign isn’t enough. It’s smaller.”<sup>16</sup> Furba states that as a young deaf child, he acquired natural sign by watching other people. It is ambiguous as to whether the people he was watching were deaf or hearing, but within the discursive logics of NSL signers, it is unlikely that the presence of deaf signers would go unstated. Thus Furba implies that hearing people can use their hands to communicate with someone deaf (and that this is one way

deaf children learn natural sign). Such an implication accords with the many times I saw strangers on buses or in stores shift from speaking to signing, or from speaking to speaking and signing, as soon as they realized that their addressee was deaf—and of course does not erase the many ways and times that family members, neighbors, and strangers refused to make adjustments, as explored at length in later chapters. Furba's comments also accord with how Sagar characterizes natural sign as that which deaf people use in conversation with their mothers.

Despite Furba's initial assurance that natural sign is enough, when I ask him to articulate how natural sign is different from NSL, as opposed to taking natural sign on its own terms, he states that natural sign is not sufficient after all, at least not for all communicative purposes. Somewhat inversely, when I asked Sagar if the deaf people with whom he worked could communicate when he first came to Maunabudhuk, at first he said no. Our ensuing conversation makes use of the same contrast between COMMUNICATION MISS (figure 4) and COMMUNICATION ALIGN (figure 5) discussed earlier.

Our conversation also demonstrates the ambiguous way that NSL signers talk about natural sign. The numbered lines indicate our alternating turns.

- 1 Sagar: No, in the beginning, there was missed communication [COMMUNICATION MISS].
- 2 Mara: So like—
- 3 Sagar: When I came here, if I asked where they lived, they would point, or if I asked about their mother or father [using natural signs], they would understand. I have been teaching them, so they have changed [how they sign].
- 4 Mara: SIGN and NATURAL-SIGN are different, so there's missed communication, but if you yourself change and put aside sign—
- 5 Sagar: I teach using NATURAL-SIGN.
- 6 Mara: and use natural sign—from the beginning using natural sign did communication work [COMMUNICATION ALIGN]?
- 7 Sagar: Yes
- 8 Mara: From the beginning?
- 9 Sagar: Yes, it was good. [Like I said] if I asked where they live, they would point. I asked Krishna and he pointed downhill, and I asked if he was Brahman/Chhetri, and he said no, he was Kami. Yeah.
- 10 Mara: So from the beginning communication did line up?
- 11 Sagar: Only in NATURAL-SIGN.<sup>17</sup>

This translated transcript shows that I had some difficulty specifying what exactly I was asking, no doubt in part because NSL is not my primary language; but I think that Sagar's equivocation also relates to the strong association of the sign COMMUNICATE with the category of NSL. In NSL discourse good communication is



FIGURE 5. (a) Seated in a field next to Sagar, Mara signs “COMMUNICATION,” moving two open, curved “C” hands toward and away from her body in alternation. (b) Mara signs “ALIGN,” moving extended index fingers toward each other to touch. Illustrations by Nanyi Jiang.

generally understood as what happens in NSL, unless otherwise specified. Yet Sagar positions himself as skilled at code-switching between NSL and natural sign, a facility that I have argued implies some degree of equivalence between the two. This conversation acknowledges that “aligned” communication can happen in natural sign, while also implicitly suggesting the importance of NSL in deaf people’s lives.



Deaf NSL signers recognize natural sign as an important and productive communicative mode. At the same time, they frame NSL as central to deaf society—and to the moral imperatives that (should) guide how NSL signers interact with other deaf people. I recall that many years ago a young deaf man told me that he would like to marry a deaf woman “from the hills” to whom he would teach NSL. Institutionally, the imperative to share NSL is operationalized in NDFN-facilitated NSL outreach classes that have been running for decades throughout Nepal, NSL classes offered by district-level deaf organizations, and specialized programs like the Sewing Training Institute for the Deaf for young women as well as the Old Deaf Project for elderly deaf people (Green 2017; Hoffmann-Dilloway 2021), both based in the Kathmandu Valley.

According to Sagar, the NDFN facilitates outreach classes year after year in order to “raise up deaf communication” and ensure equality with hearing people.<sup>18</sup> The intended beneficiaries are not only the students, but also existing members of deaf society. As he said at the concluding program of the Maunabudhuk class, its purpose was also to increase membership in Dhankuta’s deaf association.<sup>19</sup> An increase in membership would mean more people to spend time with, more people invested in communicating with each other and in forging connections with other deaf people in Nepal (and beyond). Thus teaching is not only about sharing NSL and deaf-centered values but also about broadening the reach of deaf society.

In this sense, DEAF SOCIETY is both an actually existing network of people and an aspirational project. Deepak Shakya, a founding member of the NDFN and president of the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf at the time, illustrated this duality in his speech at the NDFN’s General Assembly program in 2009.<sup>20</sup> Early in his speech he stated that deaf people as signers are equal to hearing people as speakers, then said that deaf people have their own society of which they are all members. He did not specify whether “all” designated every deaf person present or all deaf people in Nepal. Later, he mentioned that although there are many elderly deaf people in Nepal, they were not in attendance at the assembly. He encouraged everyone present not to shun older deaf people, saying that it was important for all deaf people to participate in deaf programs and be part of deaf society. Again, it was not entirely clear whether the point was that old deaf people are part of deaf society or should be. This ambiguity is socially and rhetorically productive, in that it laminates the real and the imperative onto each other.

## RESPONSIBILITIES

When discussing both outreach programs and informal interventions, NSL signers not only reiterate the responsibilities that deaf people (should) have for each other; they also imply that deaf people are best suited to teach other deaf people—and not just how to sign NSL, but how to be a person more broadly. During the conversation quoted earlier between Prajwal and his friend, Prajwal turned



FIGURE 6. Sitting in a plaza, Prajwal demonstrates someone waving their hands meaninglessly; his facial expression is somewhat frustrated. Illustration by Nanyi Jiang.

to the topic of deaf-deaf relationships. He expressed what he would like to say to several deaf acquaintances who he felt were not acting in accordance with norms of deaf unity: “If there’s a deaf person flinging their hands around meaninglessly [acting unsocialized or inappropriately; figure 6], you shouldn’t push them aside. You should be thoughtful with that person—interrupt them, sit them down, and explain things to them.”

At this point Prajwal indicated the friend seated next to him, using him as a real example in the hypothetical conversation playing out. Part way through this next utterance, the imagined addressee shifts from deaf people who are not taking proper care of other deaf people to deaf people who are in need of care. “Just like him, when he was small, he acted the same way, flinging his hands around. I told him not to be like that, I advised him over and over, and he became capable, self-sufficient [literally, he stood up; figure 7]. All of you can too. It won’t happen right away, but over time—four years, five years—and with effort, you can.



FIGURE 7. Sitting in a plaza, Prajwal signs “TO-BECOME-CAPABLE,” planting two fingers of one hand like legs onto his other palm and raising them to stand; his face looks determined. Illustration by Nanyi Jiang.

With him, it was the same. It wasn’t just one or two years, but eventually his mind became supple. In the same way, if you try, you all can too.”<sup>21</sup>

Prajwal’s impromptu lecture clearly articulates how deaf people should act in relation to one another. It also makes explicit a shared understanding that deaf people who are “flinging their hands around meaninglessly” are capable of learning and changing, so long as someone provides the necessary guidance. Moreover, Prajwal was not invoking his friend purely hypothetically. Several months earlier, Prajwal and I were sitting in his house, looking through photographs. One picture featured four young boys: Prajwal, two relatives, and a fourth child, whose appearance—his posture and facial expressions—I associated, rightly or wrongly, with intellectual disability. I asked who he was, and Prajwal replied that he was the deaf friend with whom we had been hanging out earlier. I looked disbelieving, and said that the photo did not resemble him at all, but did not say that he looked intellectually disabled. To my surprise, Prajwal replied, “He looks intellectually

disabled, right? He used to be ‘half-minded,’ and didn’t know how to eat or behave and I gave him lots of advice and he turned out fine, and his family was happy.”<sup>22</sup> It was this same friend with whom Prajwal was sitting many years later, whom he offered as an example of possible change.

I have struggled with how to think and write about this conversation, because from one perspective it construes intellectual disability as something that should be cured. I take seriously deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent people’s resistance against the idea that they need to be fixed, and how a “cure mentality . . . can be a slippery slope toward eugenics when it is applied by abled people” (Moore 2020:76). Yet disability scholars also recognize the tensions and ambivalences of cure (Moore 2020; Clare 2017).<sup>23</sup> And Erevelles (2011, cited in Braswell 2012), Soldatic and Grech (2014), and Nguyen (2018), among others, push back against the way that disability studies frameworks can risk “positioning . . . impairment as natural” (Soldatic and Grech 2014) when in fact some impairment is produced by historical and ongoing systemic inequalities.<sup>24</sup>

Thus I want to take seriously what I understand here as a cautionary tale against “misrecognition,” a social phenomenon that Graif (2018:9, 40) argues affects “deaf people worldwide” and very potently in Nepal. While some forms of misrecognition may create more momentary effects, in this case, misrecognition was pervasively limiting the ways that Prajwal’s friend could be in the world, because, Prajwal implies, people assumed that his friend was not capable of learning and growing in ways that he in fact was. Presumably if Prajwal or another deaf person had not intervened, the friend would have continued to be treated as he had up to that time. As I understand it, the argument that Prajwal makes here is not that deaf people might not also be intellectually disabled, nor that intellectually disabled deaf people should not also be brought into deaf sociality; rather, it is that different forms of difference should not be conflated, because doing so can harm people. Misrecognition, in other words, has profound effects on the person misrecognized.

This story illustrates several core tenets of deaf sociality in Nepal. First, deaf people are responsible for taking care of each other, even from a young age. Second, through appropriate communication and mentorship, people can learn and change. (The correlate of this theory is that deaf people who cease to spend time with other deaf people wither socially and intellectually, and indeed one of the participants in the Old Deaf Project, who had attended the Naxal school in its early days but then stopped, was described to me once as such.) Third, deaf people can provide communication and mentorship to other deaf people in ways that hearing people cannot or do not, and in doing so they can make significant interventions in their lives. Although Prajwal did not say so directly, the implication was that Prajwal—himself a young child—was able to teach his friend fundamental skills that the friend’s own family could not or did not.<sup>25</sup>

The following excerpt from my fieldnotes also paints a portrait of deaf people as responsible for and capable of socializing other deaf people in very basic ways. In a conversation with Pashu Dhital, a deaf activist and leader, he suggested that as part of my research, I might help him in his desire to

document how to change poor, uneducated deaf people. He described how you find deaf people in these villages, and they're dirty and their clothes are torn and they don't know how to eat properly or take care of themselves, and first you teach them how to be clean and how to eat. And how to sign, I added. Yes, he said. He said he wants to film this for 25–30 minutes every day, from that first dirty state to the last day (at the end of a couple months), when they would sign for themselves. And this would show how deaf people can be transformed through education and care.<sup>26</sup>

In Pashu's initial description of what he wanted me to document, he did not focus on deaf villagers' communicative skills; rather, he highlighted the deaf villagers' failure to care for themselves and implicitly the failure of their families to care for them. The ability or act of caring for one's bodily self is attributed not to the innate capacities of an individual but to a self properly enmeshed with others.

There are important parallels and differences here between NSL signers' theories of socialization and academic theories of language deprivation and acquisition as discussed in the introduction. Both emphasize the critical role that signing with others plays in deaf children's development. In academic explications the emphasis has generally been on accessible *language*, though interaction is also framed as important. In NSL signers' socialization theories, as the rest of this chapter demonstrates, the emphasis is on accessible *interaction*, whether that interaction is in NSL or natural sign, although it is clear that NSL signers also consider the differences between them to matter. Hoffmann-Dilloway (2016:72–75) makes a similar point, comparing the very different communicative practices of Nepali deaf people whom she calls “homesigners” who were raised in settings with fewer or more opportunities to engage in “communicative interaction with willing participants.”

These examples show that deaf NSL signers view sociality as going far beyond communication and yet depending on it as well; communicative sociality, in other words, is both “about” communication but also critical for other kinds of relationality. Neither Pashu nor Prajwal suggested that deaf people should bathe or feed each other, but that as capable deaf people, they should assume that other deaf people are also capable of such actions, even if they are not currently performing them, and they should teach them how to do so. Critically, NSL does not appear strictly necessary to such endeavors. Pashu makes it clear that the first order of business would be to teach deaf persons to take care of their own bodies; this teaching would involve communicating, and that communication by definition would be natural sign, not NSL. Similarly, Prajwal first would have endeavored to

engage with his friend in whatever way he could. In other words, what makes deaf NSL signers able to communicate with deaf non-NSL signers is natural sign and their willingness to engage beyond conventional language.

Yet recall that both Sagar and Furba described natural sign as a communicative mode used by, and even learned from, hearing people. If not only deaf NSL signers but also hearing people (can) use natural sign, then why have these deaf people not already been taught to care for themselves? An interview with a deaf leader, Rajan Khadgi, about KAD's efforts to establish the Old Deaf Project offers a poignant answer to this question. At first Rajan explains that old deaf people don't understand NSL but do understand natural sign, which he defines as "[what is used in] their homes with their families," implying that hearing family members and old deaf people can communicate. Soon after, however, Rajan says this: "At home, hearing family members enjoy themselves, but old deaf people don't. They can't understand or communicate; they have to sit there passively. It's as if they're fools, SUPPRESSED and sad. Thus the idea was that if KAD opened a program for old deaf, they could participate. They would meet regularly, and their understanding would increase. They would realize they were all deaf. They could SIGN with each other and use NATURAL-SIGN. Their communication would come together. They would enjoy themselves and be happy, and be able to let go of how they felt with their families."<sup>27</sup>

Given the juxtaposition of these two scenes—old deaf people using natural sign with their families; old deaf people sitting alone among their relatives—I take Rajan to be suggesting that in family settings, hearing people frequently, perhaps usually, don't *bother* to communicate with deaf people. This resonates powerfully with what Kushalnagar et al. (2020) describe as "communicative neglect," although their work focuses on deaf people's communicative experiences during childhood. In the examples from Pashu and Prajwal, it is unstated whether the families did not try to teach their deaf members how to care for themselves or whether they were unable to. It is also left implicit how the ability of deaf people to teach them relates both to NSL signers' skill in using natural sign and their willingness to put in the effort to communicate with other deaf people. The complex relationship between willingness to communicate with deaf people and the capacity to do so is central to the following sections and to chapters 4 and 5.

#### WAYS OF SPEAKING AND SIGNING ABOUT DEAF PEOPLE

I return now to the word *lāto* and to NSL signers' critiques of both the word and the set of assumptions and actions its usage indexes. In doing so, I further flesh out key concepts articulated by NSL signers that are grounded in their individual and collective experiences of contingent communication across NSL and natural sign and that in turn inform my approach to natural sign. Through NSL signers'



FIGURE 8. The sign that can accompany the mouthing of *lāto*. One hand, index finger extended, moves forcefully downward; the signer's facial expression is rueful. Illustration by Pratigya Shakya (NDFN 2003:159). Reproduced by permission from the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NDFN).

critique of the word *lāto*, I unpack what I mean with the English phrases *situated intelligibility* and *communicative* or *interactional vulnerability*.

Given formal definitions, it is not surprising that NSL signers reject the use of the word to refer to deaf people. One Nepali-English dictionary defines *lāto* as “a mute person; a person with a speech impediment,” or, in its adjectival form, “foolish, stupid,” “numb” (as in a foot that has fallen asleep), or “naive, artless, guileless” (Schmidt 1994). Another defines the nominal as “half-wit; idiot” and the adjectival as “dumb; dull; stupid; inarticulate” (Singh 2004). Neither definition mentions being deaf or unable to hear, though the former does include a sample sentence, the translated version of which reads “The mute have their own language,” presumably a reference to deaf people and signed communication.

The word *lāto* does not appear in the NSL dictionary that was nearly ubiquitous in NSL signers' homes during my fieldwork (NDFN 2003). In practice, NSL signers express this word with one of the following strategies:

1. they fingerspell it in the NSL manual alphabet, which corresponds to Nepali *devanāgarī* script;
2. they fingerspell and mouth *lāto*; or
3. they mouth *lāto* (without fingerspelling it) while performing the sign in figure 8.

I have the sense that this third strategy functions as quoted speech imputed to hearing people. The sign in this strategy appears in the 2003 dictionary with the



FIGURE 9. The sign DEAF. The index and middle fingers of one hand move from ear to mouth; the signer's facial expression is pleasant. Illustration by Pratigya Shakya (NDFN 2003:17). Reproduced by permission from the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NDFN).

gloss *DAMAN* 'SUPPRESSION.' I have only seen it used to accompany the mouth-ing of *lāto*, whereas a second sign glossed SUPPRESSION gets used when talking about suppressive or oppressive actions or situations, as in Rajan's quote about old deaf people.

The NSL sign in figure 9, meanwhile, refers to or describes a deaf person, deaf society, and so forth, and is glossed and translated—in NSL dictionaries, by deaf signers, and by hearing interpreters—with the Nepali *bahirā* and the English *deaf*. A Nepali-English dictionary defines *bahiro*—a version of *bahirā*—simply as “deaf” (adjectival) or “a deaf person” (nominal) (Schmidt 1994). The adjectival example sentence uses *bahiro*, while the nominal example sentence uses *bahirā*. I have seen *bahiro* listed as a derogatory term and *bahirā* as the appropriate term, so I use only the latter unless quoting.

The word *lāto* has as much or more to do with other people's (perceptions of) someone's intelligence as with that person's perceived inability—whether permanent or temporary—to hear or speak. It is also true that dictionary definitions are not necessarily indicative of vernacular expression, and thus it might be argued that when people say *lāto* to talk about someone who is deaf, they do not necessarily mean everything conveyed by the word *lāto*. One young man in Dhankuta told me that the word was simply an aspect of “our colloquial speech”



(*hāmro thet bhāshā/boli*), implying that villagers' use of the word was not intended offensively.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, when I was living in Maunabudhuk, where the word was widely used, I noticed that family members of deaf people often—though not always—referred to their loved ones using different terms, such as *apānga* 'disabled.' Moreover, a common refrain that a given deaf person doesn't seem *lāto* or even *bahirā* offers evidence that the derogatory shades of meaning in *lāto* are always present, not only in the word itself but also in the expectations sutured to the figure of a deaf person.

In 2002, when I first spent time with deaf people in Nepal, I noticed that hearing people frequently expressed surprise when they failed to recognize someone as deaf. In the years since, I have heard hearing Nepalis from a variety of regional, class, and *jāt* 'caste/ethnic' backgrounds remark countless times that a deaf person "does not seem deaf." I use the English here to cover a range of Nepali phrases, including "*lāto jasto chhaina* 'isn't like a *lāto* person,'" "*boldaina/sundaina jasto dekhidaina* 'doesn't look like someone who can't speak/hear,'" and "*sunne jastāi rahechha* 'surprisingly or contrary to the speaker's expectation, just like a hearing person.'" I have unintentionally elicited such comments by showing hearing friends photographs of deaf friends, such as in the days before smartphones, when perusing photo albums and stacks of photos was a common activity, and I often responded with indignance. I want to hold onto that indignance as part of my own interpellation into deaf sociality and ethics, as well as to think about what such statements reveal about hearing sociality. I suggest that they indicate a hearing person's recognition of dissonance between their idea of what deaf people look/are like and the way they perceive the person or people in the photograph. In other words, such statements indicate that the token has deviated from the hearing person's imagined type—one might say these are instances of someone's recognition of their misrecognition, to invoke Graif (2018).

During my fieldwork, Ganga Limbu was in his thirties, a member of the local government in Maunabudhuk, and a good friend to both Sagar and me. He once told me a story about the first time he met Sagar. When they were introduced, Ganga was told that Sagar was a teacher but didn't get a chance to talk with him, so Ganga found him later that day. Not knowing he was deaf, Ganga spoke to Sagar and then kept speaking, but Sagar didn't reply. Feeling shy, and wondering "*kasto kālko māstar* 'what kind of a teacher [is this person]?', " Ganga stopped talking. When I asked if Sagar hadn't explained that he couldn't hear, Ganga replied that he had done so only later, because the whole time Ganga was talking, Sagar had been facing the other direction.<sup>29</sup>

This story disarmingly pokes fun at Ganga's own confusion while revealing that at least back when he first met Sagar, Ganga was unlikely to think of a teacher as anything other than hearing. Moreover, nothing about Sagar's visual appearance, other than his refusal to turn around, contradicted Ganga's presuppositions

about the category of *teacher*. To draw on Liechty's (2003:143–144) analysis of how Nepalis easily identify the “embodied features” or, citing Bourdieu (1977), “bodily *hexis*” that reveal where people are from, their caste, their educational background, and so forth, Sagar's bodily *hexis*—including his posture and clothing—must have differed from the deaf people with whom Ganga was familiar or from his image of deaf people. Unlike the deaf adults Ganga knew in Maunabudhuk (most of whom had not gone to school), Sagar grew up going to a residential deaf school. He also had spent a lot of time in urban centers and dressed in the latest fashions of his age group. Thinking about this again at a remove of over a decade, what strikes me is that the person who introduced Sagar likely would have mentioned that he was a teacher of deaf people (however this was phrased in Nepali), which would have made the category *deaf* present in the conversation. And even so, Ganga thought that Sagar heard him but strikingly chose not to respond.

Relatedly, a teacher in Maunabudhuk told me that before meeting Sagar, he thought that you could always tell if someone was deaf from the way they walk, their facial expressions, and their hand movements (the latter, I assume, even when not signing, as Sagar of course signed), but that Sagar walked and looked “just like us, like speaking people.”<sup>30</sup> Although hearing people in this area do differentiate among deaf residents (discussed in chapter 2), these comments are evidence that the figure of a deaf person is somewhat monolithic. Indeed the social typification of what deaf people are like is so entrenched that even people in Maunabudhuk who knew Sagar well would sometimes ask, “But he can hear, can't he? He just can't speak?” Once, memorably, a woman with whom Sagar chatted and joked almost daily requested that he stick out his tongue for inspection, searching for a bodily fact to which his seeming difference—not from her but from other deaf people—might adhere or that might explain the dissonance she felt between her image of deaf people and her experience of Sagar as a deaf person.

#### CRITIQUING THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF UNINTELLIGIBILITY

When deaf people decry the use of *lāto*, they are protesting the derogatory meanings conveyed by the word itself as well as the deeply held assumptions about deaf people indexed by the above stories. An examination of publicly articulated statements against the word reveals that this protest employs two primary rhetorical strategies—namely, equating speech and sign as forms of communication and listing the positive attributes of deaf people to contradict the pejorative attributes implicit in *lāto*. Moreover, this protest is a call for hearing people to treat deaf people differently than they often do.

At the 2009 NDFN General Assembly, Rajendra Sharma, a longtime deaf leader from Pokhara, recalled the history of the deaf movement in Nepal: “I am

very happy because [the result of deaf organizing and activism is that] our communication is good. Just as hearing people have their speech, we deaf people have our sign. Speech and sign are equal. There should be a moratorium on the word *lāṭo* [fingerspelled]. Just because hearing people speak, this doesn't make us deaf people fools—our bodies are fine, we can walk, we can do work, help people, so we are actually equal.”<sup>31</sup> Before he even mentions the word *lāṭo*, Rajendra posits a relationship of equivalence: hearing is to speech as deaf is to sign. In other words, what matters is not *how* someone communicates but *that* they communicate. Rajendra then articulates a theory that different human capacities—bodily, mental, communicative, moral, economic—are separable. Deaf people are physically unimpaired (“our bodies are fine, we can walk”), capable of productive labor (“we can do work”), and situated within networks of sociality (“we can help people,” reminiscent of Dawa Gurung’s comment in the introduction), just like hearing people. The emphasis on deaf people being productive, able to walk, and so forth might seem like a distancing tactic from other disabilities; however, I interpret it more as a call for nondisabled people not to misrecognize or equate different kinds of disabilities. The core traits Rajendra mentions of course represent only one of many possible understandings of what constitutes personhood within Nepal across time and space (e.g., McHugh 1989; Desjarlais 1992; Leve 1999; Pradhan 2020).

At the same program, Raghav Bir Joshi, a former president of the NDFN and the only deaf member of the first Constituent Assembly (now dissolved), made a similar argument, inflected with his signature humor and insight: “Hearing people think that deaf people are fools, but this is not the case. Our minds are still fine. We can’t speak or hear, but our minds and our hands and our signing are good. Hearing people’s way of thinking is oppressive. Let me make an analogy. Let’s say there’s a car. The horn is broken, it can’t produce a sound, but the rest of the car is in great condition. Would we throw away the whole car? Those people [with oppressive attitudes] should think about that!”<sup>32</sup> Raghav makes two points here with the analogy. First, like Rajendra, he points out that although deaf people don’t necessarily use sounds to do so, they are perfectly capable of communicating. Second, Raghav suggests that when members of hearing society treat deaf people as if they were “fools,” they are in fact “throwing away” a valuable resource in “great condition.” The unstated, and very funny, takeaway is that the *real* fool is someone who throws away an entire car because of a broken horn—in a country where most people, if they own a vehicle at all, have a motorcycle or scooter.

At the farewell program in Maunabudhuk, Sagar’s speech took a similar tack, not surprising in that he had attended the General Assembly where the above speeches were given, as well as other NDFN-sponsored programs. Indeed the iterative quality of the speeches at the General Assembly and the appearance of similar rhetoric in other contexts exemplify how national events serve as nodes

for the circulation of particular deaf rhetorics and logics. This is what Sagar said, using fingerspelling to articulate *lāto*: “To look down on and consider deaf people *lāto* is unacceptable. *BAHIRĀ* must be said. Look at the deaf people here in front of us: they are clean, they are capable, they are not *lāto*. You can see this for yourselves. They are thoughtful and capable of walking in a straight line. They do not gesticulate randomly. They are not intellectually disabled, that’s different. They are deaf.”<sup>33</sup>

Like the older leaders quoted above, Sagar points out the positive traits of deaf people, including their cleanliness. He further specifies what deaf people are *not*: people whose moving hands mean nothing, people who are intellectually disabled. While it might be argued that the 2009 NDFN speeches are referring to NSL signers (and not necessarily all deaf Nepalis), Sagar explicitly frames his comments as about the deaf people “here in front of us,” all of whom were natural signers, albeit natural signers who had taken an NSL class. The implicit accusation in these utterances is that when deaf people move their hands (whether to produce NSL or natural sign), it is *hearing people* who fail to understand that they are saying something meaningful. Indeed Raghav Bir Joshi made this explicit and took the observation to its logical end. Here he articulates *lāto* by mouthing it and using the sign in figure 8: “If we deaf are *lāto* because we can’t understand hearing people with their sweet talk, then hearing people who can’t understand deaf signing are equally *lāto*.”<sup>34</sup>

Acharya (1997) invokes a similar premise: “The derogatory term *lāto* is used to describe the deaf in Nepali society. However, in a situation in which a conversation is ongoing between deaf signers, a hearing onlooker who does not know sign language is him/herself *lāto*.”<sup>35</sup> In this written version (implied but not explicitly stated in Raghav’s), deaf signers signing *with each other* are revealed not to be *lāto*; they—if not the hearing people who watch them—understand each other just fine. The “hearing people can be *lāto*” trope thus insists that who is *lāto* is contextual and not tied to deafness or signing per se. Relatedly, the importance of deaf society is not only in the use of NSL but also in how it makes possible the configuration of multiple signers communicating together. And NSL signers are not the only ones to draw this conclusion. Once, while I was talking with a group of older hearing men at a teashop in Maunabudhuk, one of them—who would not have encountered this joke in NSL or in writing—stated that when deaf people sign, it is the hearing who become *lāto*. It is doubtful that he was strictly differentiating between a group of NSL signers and a group of natural signers; what matters is that when deaf people communicate with each other, they are revealed as not being unintelligible after all. On the contrary, it is hearing people who become *lāto*. In the same vein, Graif (2018: 121) writes in relation to a deaf protester’s reflections on the importance of NSL signers signing together in public that “the sight of an exuberant crowd signing in unison serves to displace the category of deafness away

from generalized encounters with *lātohood* and onto the fact of a self-engaged deaf community.”

While in some senses the negative connotations of *lāto* focus on deaf people as not speaking, or not speaking clearly, in these formulations, hearing people are *lāto* not because they fail to *produce* (what are recognized by others as) communicative forms but because they fail to *understand* the forms that others have produced. Critically, the (in)ability to understand—and to be understood—is contingent on who is speaking/signing and who is listening/watching. In other words, being *lāto* is not an inherent, essential, or fixed attribute but rather relational and dependent on context.

#### COMMUNICATIVE AND INTERACTIONAL VULNERABILITY

Yet the trope’s ironic humor—hearing people can be *lāto* too!—rests on the fact that while in theory anyone can be rendered unintelligible (i.e., anyone can not-understand and be not-understood), in practice it is much more likely to happen to deaf people compared to hearing people. The hearing *lāto* joke thus invokes a theory of situated intelligibility, which both legitimates deaf people *and* acknowledges their communicative and interactional vulnerability. This vulnerability helps to account for an ambiguity I detected between an argument that deaf people are categorically not *lāto* and an argument that only certain kinds of deaf people are not *lāto*. A hearing teacher of the deaf addressed the mostly-hearing audience at the end of Maunabudhuk’s NSL program with the following words, exemplifying this ambiguity:

In this six-month program, the reason for providing the deaf with sign language [*sāṅketik bhāshā*]—that is to say, what is in their own hearts, their emotions, to express these, they will have been using only their natural language [*prakritik bhāshā*]. Now in these modern times, they also have a “mother language” [*mātribhāshā*], that is, for the deaf, sign language is their “mother language.” And a program such as this one, its reason is so that they can express what is in their hearts, their emotions, and make others understand. What is more, it seems to us—in village homes, we continue to say *lāṭālāṭi*, of incompetent people [*najanna*], people who don’t understand [*nabujhna*], foolish people [*agyānta*]. Saying *lāṭālāṭi* is unacceptable; when speaking of *bahirā*, we must say *bahirā*. Because calling people who understand *lāṭālāṭi*, well, that’s not right, to say this to/of uncomprehending people, well, that’s okay.<sup>36</sup>

Like Rajendra and others, the teacher here enters a discussion of *lāto* through a discussion of sign language and, like NSL signers, explicitly contrasts “natural language” (i.e., natural sign), with “sign language” (i.e., NSL). Moreover, he sets

up a line of demarcation that places deaf people qua deaf people safely on the non-*lāto* side but leaves room for the possibility that there are people of whom it is *thikāi* ‘okay, more or less alright’ to say *lāto*. It is unclear whether he means that it is okay because as *nabujhne* (uncomprehending) people, they *are* in fact *lāto* or because as *nabujhne* people they will not understand, and thus not be hurt by, the word.<sup>37</sup>

While it might be easy to dismiss these words as a hearing person’s problematic musings, I once saw a deaf NSL signer say explicitly that there are *lāto* deaf people. In a discussion between two young deaf women, Gita, who had more formal education, asked Sushila if she wanted to continue her studies. Sushila said yes, but that she was too old to do so, and proceeded to describe how as a girl she had attended a hearing school. She made one friend but had trouble understanding the teacher, and the other students made fun of her for not being able to hear or speak. Later, after dropping out, she learned NSL, and the people who had teased her apologized. Gita responded to Sushila’s story by saying that she should not be sad and should keep trying to further herself. She then relayed a parallel story, revealing that she used to be called *lāto* (which she fingerspelled), but later the people who had said this realized they were wrong. She added, “These days there are many *bahirā*, but few *lāto*. There are *lāto* in the villages, but there are so many deaf schools now in different places.”<sup>38</sup>

In both Sushila’s and Gita’s stories, hearing people taunt the deaf protagonist, only to realize the error of their ways. In Sushila’s recounting, this realization is explicitly linked to her acquisition of NSL. That is, Sushila frames the change in hearing people’s attitude toward her in terms of a transformation in her own communicative capacities. By becoming someone who could easily understand and be understood by others (NSL signers if not hearing teachers), she created the conditions of possibility for hearing people to recognize that she could communicate even if she couldn’t hear or speak. Gita, meanwhile, did not specify the temporal relationship between her own linguistic competence—she learned NSL relatively young—and hearing people’s realization that calling her *lāto* was wrong. In fact, her final comment suggests that as a deaf person educated from a young age, she never fit into the *lāto* category. Yet in firmly staking her claim to being *bahirā*, she explicitly says that there are deaf people who belong in the *lāto* category. In Gita’s formulation, then, the categories of *bahirā* and *lāto* are distinctive and mutually exclusive, separated by space, by education, and by communicative practice.

Recall that Rajendra Sharma, quoted earlier, situated the equality of sign and speech in relation to the growth of deaf organizations and social networks. Stating that deaf and hearing people “are actually equal,” he too noted that things are different in villages. He said: “There is one place left, the village, where the word *lāto* is still used, where the culture continues, but we hope that with our efforts this will change in the future.”<sup>39</sup> In fact, people in cities also use the word *lāto*,

and I am not claiming that Rajendra thinks it is appropriate to call deaf villagers *lāto*. But what then is he suggesting? Prior to this moment, Rajendra has given an account of deaf Nepalis' history, praised deaf signing, and named signed communication (and other capabilities) as evidence that deaf people are not *lāto*. Given the context, it is clear that when Rajendra refers to signing, he means Nepali Sign Language, and deaf villagers as a category do not sign NSL. I wonder, therefore, whether the "culture" to which Rajendra refers consists entirely of hearing people's lack of proper understanding of deaf people's capacities or whether it also includes deaf villagers' lack of NSL. His framing of the issue suggests the stakes for NSL signers both of NSL itself and of participating in a form of communicative sociality in which they are consistently intelligible.

At the same time, deaf Nepalis' discourses more generally emphasize that anyone can be rendered *lāto* and that communication in natural sign is absolutely possible. While decrying the word *lāto*, moments like this hint that some deaf people might correctly (in the semantic, not moral sense) be called *lāto* because they are not intelligible in the way that NSL signers are. The "hearing *lāto*" joke reveals that intelligibility is contingent on social factors, and NSL signers view learning NSL and participating in deaf society as the best way to ensure that they are not treated as *lāto*. Yet a slight variation on the above joke shows that deaf NSL signers also recognize themselves as vulnerable to being ignored or not understood, certainly in comparison to hearing people.

At the 2009 NDFN program, Ramesh Shrestha, a deaf leader and teacher, characterized deaf people's historical relationship with the Nepali state: "In the past the Nepali government did not treat deaf people as equal to hearing people. We explained our plight, told them we had no sign language training, requested their assistance. Yet even though we told them this repeatedly, they paid no attention [literally, they did not hear us], because they did not understand our signing. And I ask, if you can't hear us sign, who is deaf? We or you?" In asking these questions, Ramesh uses the standard NSL sign DEAF (as in figure 9), while mouthing *bahirā*. By calling the government "deaf" and asking why they were unable to "hear" their signs, Ramesh neatly plays on the literal and figurative meanings of *deaf* and *hearing*.<sup>40</sup> Yet with this same rhetorical device he also implies that the experience of being unable to understand, of being outside shared language practices and incapable of making sense of what others say (as the government was in relation to deaf signing), belongs not only to *lāto* people but to *bahirā* ones as well. The strict separation of *bahirā* people from *lāto* people shows slippage, unintelligibility being a state to which *all* deaf people are vulnerable, precisely because intelligibility is—as deaf discourse so powerfully demonstrates—a socially produced, relational quality.

The *Students' Companion Dictionary* (Singh 2004) in fact offers this definition of *bahiro* [*sic*]: "deaf; hard of hearing; inattentive." While *deaf* and *hard of hearing*



are in and of themselves neutral adjectives, the word *inattentive* reveals a collapse in the dictionary writer's perspective between a person not being able to hear someone and not paying attention to them, a collapse between an inability and an unwillingness to attend to someone. It is the same collapse, but inverted, that NSL signers highlight and critique when they argue that hearing people should (and can) communicate with deaf people but often do not. Sagar described different ways that hearing people treat deaf people in a speech at the end of the Maunabudhuk NSL program for which he was the teacher.

In the villages [deaf people] are made to sit like donkeys, doing nothing but work. This is not necessary. Deaf and hearing are equal! Deaf people are oppressed, while hearing people travel to foreign countries, but we should be treated equally. Property should be divided equally [between deaf and hearing heirs]. Making deaf people stay at home, oppressed, while hearing people are allowed to *GHUMNA* 'WANDER-AROUND' is unacceptable. Deaf and hearing are equal. . . . Hiring a deaf person but paying only a pittance for their labor is also unacceptable. Their guardians should advise them on this as well, for their guardians to be passive is unacceptable. To shoo deaf people away from stores is unacceptable. To tell a deaf person repeatedly, "Just a second," and keep talking with other hearing people is unacceptable. Shopkeepers should talk with deaf and hearing people in turn.<sup>41</sup>

Sagar creates a striking contrast between actions that oppress, such as not paying deaf people fairly or shooing them away from stores, and actions that create and affirm equality, such as paying them enough or talking with them in turn. He juxtaposes quantifiable, even legally inflected ethical demands—fair wages and inheritances—with the ethical demands of everyday life. Families, he tells the primarily hearing audience, should expect all members to shoulder equal shares of work; parents of deaf people should teach their children to stand up for themselves and should stand up for them when necessary; shopkeepers should talk with deaf and hearing customers in turn.

In contrast to the wish expressed by deaf people that in the future all hearing people would learn Indian Sign Language (Friedner 2015:157–161), Sagar is firmly focused on the possibilities of the present. As mentioned in the introduction, attending to such calls might be thought of as an anthropology of the *meanwhile*. Not only *should* deaf and hearing people enter into communicative relationships, they *can*, right now, so long as hearing people are willing to do so. Knowing NSL and being around other NSL signers is the surest guarantee that deaf people can participate in communicative sociality, but said participation does not have to depend on knowing NSL or even on being part of deaf society. If deaf society is a social space in which deaf people ethically orient toward communicating with each other in sign, whether NSL or natural sign, Sagar's call is for society writ large to also be a space in which the possibilities of communicating with deaf people are felt as ethical demands. This call, and its fulfillment, are possible because natural



sign exists, and yet the very fact that Sagar articulates it points to deaf signers' interactional vulnerability.

## CONCLUSION

NSL signers' discourse makes clear that to be deaf is not to be *lāto* in a permanent or ontological sense; but to be deaf when others are unable or unwilling to sign with you is to be treated as if you were *lāto*; and to be treated by others as if you were *lāto* positions you in that moment as *being lāto*. Thus deaf Nepalis' critiques of and campaign against the word *lāto* are not only a protest against being *perceived* as *lāto* but also against being *made lāto*. They reveal both the distinctions and the connections between communicative differences, "sensory asymmetries" and "sensory politics" (De Meulder et al. 2019), and communicative or interactional vulnerability. On the one hand, NSL signers' lived daily practices and discourse forcefully dismantle the assumption that to be deaf is to have difficulty communicating. They embody and objectify NSL as both the medium and the result of socially, politically, and personally meaningful interactions among deaf people. On the other hand, NSL signers also know, and in their discourse recognize, that being deaf makes them vulnerable during interactions with hearing people who assume them to be *lāto*.

The categories and logics explored in this chapter, the ones I learned by spending time in deaf society with NSL signers, have helped to guide the fundamentally relational approach to natural sign that I take throughout this book. They reveal that conventional language is both critically important and not always necessary; that to be deaf is not to be *lāto* but to be deaf makes it more likely that hearing people will treat you as *lāto*; that knowing NSL and other NSL signers makes it less likely that you will experience being made *lāto*, in part because NSL signers acquire linguistic skills that affect the effectiveness of their natural sign use, and in part because NSL signers get to spend more time engaging in communicative sociality with other NSL signers and less with hearing people; and that being an NSL signer does not protect you fully. If hearing people ignore, misunderstand, or even try but nevertheless fail to make sense of deaf signers, deaf signers often have little recourse, precisely because to protest or resolve such treatment would require that hearing people pay attention to and understand them in the first place. NSL signers, especially those in urban areas, can gaze beyond any given conversation in which they are treated as *lāto*: to their next conversation in NSL; to growing recognition by hearing people that NSL is a language, even if not one they know; to increasing availability of trained NSL-Nepali interpreters. Natural signers cannot.

The remainder of this book enters more fully into the worlds of natural signers, and into the possibilities, limits, and ethics of natural sign communication beyond NSL networks. Natural sign, almost by definition, involves a great deal of variation,

and I ground my discussion of it in a particular time and place: Maunabudhuk and Bodhe in 2010 (and into the present). The specific setting of these villages shapes what natural signing is like there. At the same time, my work and travel elsewhere in Nepal and indeed the very naming and characterizing of the phenomenon by NSL signers suggests that natural sign is an important dimension of many, almost certainly most, deaf Nepalis' experiences.