

CHAPTER I

Arjun: The sense of things

If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the foundation of all there lay only a wildly seething power which writhing with obscure passions produced everything that is great and everything that is insignificant, if a bottomless void never satiated lay hidden beneath all—what then would life be but despair?

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

HOMECOMINGS

Arjun Gurung is deaf. He lives in a small room on the third floor of a backpacker hotel in northeastern Nepal. His family has owned this hotel since before he was born, and over the last few years especially they've earned an international reputation as warm and capable hosts. Their hotel is located on a minor trekking route, and this location brings both tourists and tourist dollars to an otherwise remote and generally poor part of the country. Though Arjun's family has been prominent in the area for many generations, the cash generated by their hotel has allowed them to maintain this prominence over the past few decades as they, like all Nepalis, enter into increasingly global frames of reference.

I first met Arjun in the summer of 2007, when both he and I were in our late twenties. I was on a short break from fieldwork,¹ and I had booked a room in his family's hotel completely unaware that a deaf man lived there. Arjun himself had come home only recently after living for more than two decades in Kathmandu, first at a boarding school for the deaf and then later in an apartment with friends. Now back home, he stands out. In ways apparent even to outsiders, he just doesn't look like he comes from here. His family's hotel basks in a carefully maintained veneer of rural authenticity, and it is surrounded for miles on all sides by the more functional assemblage of new and old that characterizes subsistence farming. Arjun, by contrast, is instantly recognizable as an eager participant in Nepal's emerging urban middle class. He wears jeans and designer tee-shirts, he follows the international soccer scene, and he prefers foreign-brand beer to his mother's (excellent) homemade apple brandy. His habits, appearance, and disposition simply do not fit with the environment around him. By his own admission, he felt more comfortable in the city. He says he misses it dearly now that he is away.

As the only deaf person within a ten-mile walk, Arjun probably also misses the large and vibrant deaf community that comprised his daily world when he lived in Kathmandu. In Nepal, the deaf care deeply about one another. Though Arjun would no doubt laugh at the sentimentality of my words here, I think he would, with some caveats, ultimately agree. The bonds of language,

1. The accounts in this book are the product of roughly four years of immersive fieldwork conducted between 2003 and 2018. In this chapter, my descriptions of Arjun draw primarily from a period about a year following our first meeting. During that time, I visited him frequently at his home, and my experiences there motivated a major shift in my methodological engagements with deaf Nepal. Previously, across a series of shorter research trips between 2003 and 2006, I focused my attention on political expression in the institutional spaces where deaf people congregate. This preliminary work anticipated the tone of my longest continuous stretch of fieldwork, which took place over eighteen months in 2007 and 2008. These years were characterized by dramatic political changes for Nepal in general and for deaf Nepal in particular. These changes culminated in a comprehensive peace agreement that ended the decades-long civil war and a contentious election that saw Nepal's first deaf politician join the country's highest legislative body (see chapter 2). During this period, I began to spend more and more time with the deaf people I knew in their mostly hearing homes, following them especially as they moved between their deaf and hearing worlds. This new approach has characterized my relationship with deaf Nepalis since then, especially in short follow-up field visits in 2009 and 2012 and in a more ongoing engagement living and working in Kathmandu from 2014 to the present.

aid, obligation, and friendship that deaf people build are frequently the most powerful and durable parts of their lives. These specifically deaf relationships often outshine (though never fully erase) all their ties to the hearing, relegating even parents, siblings, spouses, and neighbors to the emotional periphery of deaf lives. When those like Arjun from remote parts of the country arrive for the first time in deaf Kathmandu, they tend to describe the experience as a *homecoming*, steeped in feelings of kinship and belonging. For most, returning completely to the hearing world, like Arjun has done, would be unthinkable.

Arjun, however, tends to shrug off most questions about his place amongst the hearing with a characteristic reserve. He has no plans to leave, he says, so the question of whether he *likes* being back home just isn't relevant or interesting. This kind of self-effacement was very typical of Arjun in the time I knew him. He is friendly but cool, engaging but undemonstrative, and most of all always very self-composed. He tells great stories, but his affect is so flat that it can be hard to know how he intends for his audiences to react. Though I am certain that Arjun misses his deaf friends back in Kathmandu, he never admitted it to me.

Conversations about politics, however, often leave Arjun visibly angry. In particular, he is angry about rural Nepal's "lack of development," which for him seems to describe a particular mindset more than any absence of infrastructure. Nepal is a country of vast potential, he says, but it is stifled by a range of deep problems: corrupt politicians, backwards-thinking citizens, ineffective foreign aid, and—especially—an archaic and burdensome system of kinship obligations. These are familiar targets of middle-class frustration in contemporary Nepal, but for Arjun they are all explicitly rooted in a more basic question of *individual desire*. How, he would often ask, are we meant to resolve the tensions between what people want for themselves and what is good for their communities? To hear him tell it, the entirety of Nepal's recent history is a story about the rise of individualism. He attributed these transformations mostly to Western influences, though it was not always clear to me whether he understood the changes he saw as the *cause of* or the *solution to* rural Nepal's many contemporary problems. Perhaps he meant them to be both. In any case, Arjun always seemed to me preoccupied by the question of what it means to be someone who *wants* things. This same air of irresolution—where the personal and the social collide—colored every account I heard Arjun make of his life and especially his decision to return home.

Arjun is home because his parents expected him to marry and because he reluctantly agreed that it was time. He sold his few things in the capital, bought

a tourist-class bus ticket to a nearby trekking hub, and walked the seven remaining hours home. Two months later, he was married. None of his friends from Kathmandu were invited to the banquet, though Arjun says he has no regrets. He says he likes being married, but he adds that he is in no rush to have children. He cites Nepal's poor political situation and a lack of good schools in the area as reasons to wait a few more years. He admits that this decision has become a point of contention with Suddha, his wife. Suddha is not deaf, nor does she know any deaf people other than her husband. She comes from a poor but well-regarded family of sharecroppers a half-day's walk from the main road. Though she is significantly better educated than her very limiting socioeconomic background would predict, her manner, disposition, and dialect nevertheless make it very clear that she was born into a household quite different from the one in which she now lives. The class dynamics at play here are nuanced, but they also boil down to some very simple facts: Arjun's maternal uncles are regional landlords of some note, and his father has a reputation for getting politicians elected; most of Suddha's male relatives, meanwhile, are day laborers.

Nevertheless, things between Arjun and Suddha moved forward quickly because everyone agreed that the marriage was such an obviously good fit. At face value, this is a strange claim. Every visible sign tells the story of the couple's very different life histories. They are affectionate with each other, but even a year after their wedding they were still often bashful and awkward in each other's company. Arjun acknowledged this tension, which he attributed to the fits and starts of their learning how to interact. But marriage negotiations have a tendency to collapse otherwise incommensurate schemes of value. Given the preference in the area for marriage between equals, it would seem that Arjun's deafness and Suddha's humble station came somehow to balance in the tally of social status that preceded their match. This is actually a very familiar type of marriage in contemporary Nepal: men with discrete, personal stigmas (e.g., various disabilities, addictions, or personality "quirks") often marry women with more gradient, familial disadvantages (e.g., low class, capital, or prestige). Though it is impolite to speak too explicitly about the benefits and compromises that a marriage alliance might bring, both families told me how relieved they are to have found each other. Even Arjun, though famously taciturn, is prone to gush about just how much he and Suddha are in love.

Despite his happy marriage, however, Arjun admits that he is desperately bored. In Kathmandu, he involved himself in political movements, dated both deaf and hearing girls, and worked as a tutor at the school that he had once

attended. Then, after more than twenty years away, he came back to a “home” he had visited only a few dozen times since childhood. He spends most of his time now doing chores around the hotel, but the work is repetitive and usually better handled by his family’s large and very competent staff. On top of it all, he doesn’t even have other fluent signers to talk to. As Arjun puts it, there’s just not a lot to do here. He enjoys managing the family’s stable of horses and chatting with the international tourists who pass through town, but, these small pleasures aside, the transition has not been easy. More than once, I arrived at the hotel to find Arjun and his mother mired in the aftermath of an argument and actively ignoring each other. This is a very familiar story in contemporary Nepal’s emerging middle classes: A young son from a prominent rural family is sent away to the capital city to get an education that is unavailable closer to home. While living there, he acquires tastes, habits, and ideas incompatible with the rhythms and values of everything he left behind. Though Arjun is deaf, the structure of his experience belongs to a much wider scope. He is, in many ways, very typical of an entire generation of dislocated youth.

There is a single detail, however, that makes this story unmistakably deaf: here at home, all of the people closest to Arjun believe that he is a simpleton. They think—incorrectly—that he has only a childish understanding of what goes on around him and that he is incapable of language or complex thought. They are unaware, for example, that he can read, write, and even do basic book-keeping. His English is arguably better than theirs, and he has a decent grasp of French, German, Hebrew, and Japanese. He has cultivated this polylingualism in a series of meticulously organized notebooks, each filled with words and phrases taught to him by his international clientele. He often studies these notebooks late into the night, and he says that one day he hopes to compile them into a universal dictionary and phrasebook. In ways that would seem obvious, Arjun is exceptionally intelligent. He has a bone-dry sense of humor with a strong penchant for sarcasm; he follows national politics but chooses not to vote; and he considers professional wrestling (which his parents adore) to reflect poorly on American culture. He is the only person within a half-day’s walk who understands the hotel’s solar electric system, and he plans to buy a few extra panels in the near future to power a television and an Xbox. Within virtually any other frame of recognition, Arjun would be unmistakable as the most cosmopolitan member of his family. Yet somehow his parents—though plainly devoted to the happiness of their only child—believe that he is an actual, literal idiot.

For reasons that are not yet clear, Arjun's family members do not easily see in him the elaborate structures of mind that they take for granted in each other and in everyone else. He is, to them, almost animal-like in his way of being a person. The precise entailments of this assessment are nuanced enough, complex enough, and culturally specific enough to justify the remainder of this chapter's attention, but as a beginning let it suffice to say that he is treated by those around him as the kind of person from whom very little should be expected and to whom very little should be offered. Neighbors and cousins talk about Arjun with diminutive pronouns more appropriate for toddlers, dogs, or bad drivers, and the trekking guides who come through town have been known to get drunk and tease him, ostensibly for not understanding that he is being teased. For her part, Arjun's mother often relates how proud she is of her son, and yet even her most boastful stories invariably highlight behaviors that would be unremarkable from any adult man seen as fully competent. That Arjun can, for example, feed and clothe himself, travel into town alone, and follow simple housekeeping routines apparently strikes her as something worth bragging about. Meanwhile, she seems not even to notice her son's many complex engagements with the world outside his home. Instead, the broader scope of Arjun's human experience—virtually everything he thinks, does, and is—remains somehow lost to the noise.

Arjun is characteristically stoic about these circumstances, but it is hard for me not to feel staggered by frustration on his behalf. After all, social life is built on the premise of intersubjectivity. Knowing other people means having ways of speculating about what they are experiencing. Skeptics might argue that we can never truly know anything about the minds of others, but in Nepal at least this posture of solipsism is at most a thought experiment and never actually a way of relating to real people in the world. Instead, under all normal circumstances, we sense purpose in the things that others do. We perceive in their actions the presence of thoughts, sentiments, and drives—unique in configuration perhaps but ultimately *human* in nature. Even when the connections between outward actions and internal mental states are hard to see, we maintain a deep trust in the fact that they exist (see Robbins 2008; Robbins and Rumsey 2008). Ethnographic research, in particular, would be inconceivable without the orienting assumption that people everywhere have minds that *make sense*. This is what Adolf Bastian famously called the “psychic unity of mankind,” and it is what allows us—even in the face of stark cultural difference—to engage coherently with others. Arjun is somehow exempt from this unity at home, and in this book my aim is to understand how and why that came to be.

NOT KNOWING ARJUN

In telling Arjun's story here, my goal is not to suggest that he is in any way typical. Indeed, deaf lives in Nepal are widely diverse, and the sheer extent of Arjun's isolation is actually quite unusual. His experience of living at the margins of hearing expectations, however, is universal. Deaf lives are lived in predominantly hearing worlds, and hearing worlds often do a very poor job of relating to deaf experiences. Especially in matters of identity, language, and personhood, the deaf are constantly misunderstood. In recent years, documenting and correcting this history has been the primary aim of the newly emerging academic discipline known as deaf studies. Since its rise in the 1960s amidst the successes of humanism, feminism, and the civil rights movement, deaf studies has worked hard to demonstrate the value and complexity of everything native to deaf communities (Ladd 2003; Padden and Humphries 2009). Central to this ambition has been an explicitly ethnographic argument: namely, when we consider the various languages, beliefs, and practices of deaf communities worldwide, we should understand them not merely as adaptations to the hearing world but instead as the autonomous, constituting parts of a distinctly deaf cultural modality (see, e.g., Monaghan et al. 2003). According to this framework of analysis, Arjun's dilemma would be very familiar: though his family members see his disability, they fail completely to understand his identity.

This emphasis on identity as a driver of cultural difference has been tremendously productive for deaf studies, but there are some hard constraints on what it can reveal. It grants complexity to deaf communities precisely by stripping it from the families, publics, and contexts in which deaf people are always immersed. Arjun's mother, for example, *talks* about her son as someone flatly deprived of human capacities, but she does not always *act* as if this is so. In day-to-day practice, her engagements are much more contextually entangled. She sees Arjun affable and animated with the backpackers who pass through town, and she relies on him to attend to their needs as customers. What she seems not to perceive, however, is the substance of interiority that should normally accompany these behaviors. Even as Arjun manages food orders, guest check-ins, and complicated billing cycles effectively, she believes that he acts with no real understanding of what he does. As she puts it, "The tourists are nice to him, but he doesn't understand them. He brings them the menus, but he doesn't know why. He doesn't even know what menus are for. He smiles because they smile."

The tourists themselves, meanwhile, interpreted their interactions with Arjun very differently. They felt uncomfortable initially, they said, but ultimately they were surprised by how easy it was to interact with him despite his deafness. Indeed, Arjun is a master at putting his guests at ease. He shows interest in their lives, and he teaches them with obvious pleasure how he communicates effectively. On the occasions that I observed it, this would usually begin with simple gestures supported by notes written on scraps of paper, which then progressed over the course of the evening through increasingly elaborate acts of pantomime (accompanied, usually, by no small amount of both laughter and alcohol). People *like* Arjun. He is an excellent host. Every morning, before the tourists set off to continue further up the mountain, they linger with him over long goodbyes. His notebooks are filled with the messages of remembrance that they have left, and he regularly gets thick stacks of postcards delivered from abroad. When I asked Arjun's mother about these interactions, however, she merely smiled and reaffirmed how nice it was that the foreigners were kind to her son.

For a man understood to be a simpleton, Arjun is remarkably effective at navigating the nuances of cross-cultural customer service. This alignment of circumstances would seem to present an obvious paradox, but critically his mother does not experience it as such. She loves her son, and she tells anyone who will listen how glad she is to have him back at home. Nevertheless—somehow—she perceives remarkably little about him. In the places that should be filled by meaning, she sees instead actions without purpose and efficacy without understanding. These assessments are conspicuous and difficult to explain. After all, Arjun's mother is a lodger of foreign tourists by trade, and she is surrounded constantly by people she does not understand. Most of her guests speak languages that she doesn't know, and they all have habits and dispositions that she finds strange. In a very real way, her livelihood is built from the gaps left by cultural and linguistic difference, and yet she does not hesitate to fill these gaps with meaning, or at least the possibility of it. On one occasion, she even pressed me with obvious amusement to explain why foreigners are so eager to carry heavy backpacks up a mountain and call it a "vacation." In the end, she concluded it must have something to do with "American culture." In this capacity and countless others, her ways of not knowing her guests are very different from her ways of not knowing her son.

On one particular visit, for example, I arrived to find Arjun's mother stumbling over herself to explain a complicated bill to a Japanese tourist. The conversation wasn't going well, and both of them were struggling to maintain their

good humor. Her guest was upset, and it wasn't clear to her why. This led her to speculate urgently about the contents of his mind. The problem, she guessed, had something to do with how lodging for his porters had been tallied, but that's as far as she could get. In these moments of breakdown, the only thing she had at her disposal was a vast set of heuristics built through years of trial and error. She was adamant, for example, that one should never smile too much at Japanese people when they are feeling frustrated. "It makes them mad," she said. "That's all I know." In this regard, though her guest was profoundly foreign to her, his foreignness had in its own way come to be something familiar. It served not only to separate her from him but also to connect them together through a shared experience of mutual opacity: "I don't understand him, and he knows I don't understand him, and I know that he knows that I don't understand him . . .," she explained with a laugh. About Arjun, her reflections are much simpler. "He's dumb, poor thing. He knows his desires, but he understands nothing else."

It is as if there is a single rule that defines for Arjun's family how everything he does should be interpreted: namely, his actions are only and exactly what they appear to be. They do not reveal something else about him, they do not indicate his state of mind, and they do not communicate his intentions or goals in anything but the most immediate sense. When Arjun gets on the roof to manipulate the solar panels, for example, his actions do not demonstrate that he understands electrical circuits; when he spends more than an hour each morning styling his hair and selecting his clothes, his choices do not reveal any interest in fashion; when he reads newspapers, journals, and magazines, his time spent does not suggest that he might be knowledgeable about politics and current events. Indeed, even as Arjun fills notebook after notebook with a staggering diversity of words and phrases, the fact that he can do so does not even demonstrate that he has access to language. Instead, when Arjun writes, his family perceives only and exactly that. He is not studying, he is not recording, and he is not communicating. He is merely applying ink to a sheet of paper, and nothing more.

Deaf people worldwide live amidst broad patterns of misrecognition, but these constraints on how Arjun's actions can be interpreted are especially perplexing. As I will argue in the coming pages, understanding them properly requires careful attention to the details of his life and context. Nepali ways of not-knowing the deaf are deeply regional in their organization, and any other cultural configuration—built on any other set of epistemological practices, any other social architecture of perception, or any other history of discourse—could have situated Arjun in completely different circumstances. Indeed, this

possibility that things could have been very different for Arjun is exactly what Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, described in his *Natural History*. In this massively ambitious catalog of everything, Leclerc includes the story of a young man in eighteenth-century France who, after more than twenty years of life, comes to hear and speak for the first time. What shocks his family and community, however, is less his miraculous cure than the revelations that come after:

A young man twenty-three to twenty-four years old, son of a craftsman of Chartres, deaf and dumb from birth, suddenly began to speak, to the great astonishment of all the city. It was known to him that some three or four months before he had heard the sound of bells, and had been extremely surprised by this new and unfamiliar sensation. Then a kind of water escaped his left ear, and he began to hear perfectly in both ears: for three or four months he listened without saying anything, and maturing in pronunciation and ideas of the words, and finally he thought himself able to break the silence, and it is said that he spoke though still imperfectly.

Skilled theologians immediately questioned him about his past state, and unraveled their main issues about God, the soul, the moral goodness or evil actions. He did not seem to have pushed his thoughts far.

Although born of literate Catholic parents, he attended Mass, and he was there instructed to make the sign of the cross and kneel in the capacity of a man who prays, he never had attached to all this any intention or other meaning; he knew not distinctly what it was that is death, and he never thought on it. (Buffon 1801, 231; see also Rée 1999, 92, for a different analysis thereof)

Though Leclerc's anonymous young deaf man kneeled, took communion, and moved his lips in prayer, he did not in fact believe; he had no thoughts of death or what came after and no remembrance of Christ's suffering. Instead, his religious devotion was mere replication. This minimal physicality was a sufficient mimesis because he found no reason to see the acts of those around him as anything more. There are clear echoes here of Arjun's life, though the players and assumptions are conspicuously reversed. Just as Arjun's parents never seem to question the constraints they perceive on the access Arjun has to everything that surrounds him, these parents of Chartres were horrified to learn that their son had copied their behaviors without also sharing their sense of purpose. Though these cases are built on diametrically opposed assessments of the deaf, they are

unified by a single human tendency: people—when faced with the fact of actors and actions—maintain assumptions about the entailments of agency that are remarkably stable across time. Through a lifetime of interactions and potential disruptions, their intuitions perdure.

In my presence at least, the only person who ever expressed any doubt over these assessments of Arjun was Suddha, and her way of talking about her husband offers something of an exception to clarify the rule. Though her role as a young daughter-in-law in a busy household made it logistically difficult for me to interview her at any length, she was nevertheless always eager to talk. She stopped me repeatedly in passing moments, invariably to ask the same very pointed question: How could she know what Arjun is thinking? Initially, I found this a very strange question for her to be asking. Suddha is actually reasonably proficient as a signer. She is the only person in the immediate area who can communicate effectively with Arjun about anything more than basic topics. Nevertheless, this fact of access seems not to make her assessments any more straightforward. The hesitation she feels serves to color the intimacy the two of them share.

Arjun and Suddha often spend their evenings together in a gazebo adjoining the main house. Long after everyone else has gone to bed, they huddle close and talk for hours in the signed-language equivalent of hushed tones. To anyone listening, their interactions are silent, punctuated only by frequent laughter. To see them, however, is to realize how animated their time together is. On these nights, they occupy a space that is strikingly out of step with the rest of the hotel's aesthetic. It is wallpapered with bold and garish posters, each juxtaposing an oversaturated stock image with an incongruous bit of reappropriated text. One photo of Alpine cottages bears the subtitle "Silence is consent," for example, and another, featuring a basket of kittens, declares prominently that "The family is more sacred than the state." Arjun's favorite poster involves an assortment of traditionally dressed foreign natives lined up above the words "Love conquers all." Arjun's parents hate the gazebo and its loud colors. The fact that it even exists is a clear concession to his sense of style and a remembrance of his life in Kathmandu. For precisely this reason, perhaps, Arjun and Suddha prefer it to any other part of the hotel. When I asked each of them separately why they spent so much time there, both of them described it as the one place they could truly be alone. To outward appearances, at least, this is a very familiar scene: here is a young couple, fully enamored with each other, talking (as Arjun later explained to me) about their dreams for the future. When I asked Suddha

about these long conversations, however, her response was heartfelt but also ambivalent and pained: “I like talking with him. We can talk all night. But, I don’t know how much he understands. I think he does, a lot of it. But how can this be known?”

Evaluations of other minds are by necessity engagements with lacunae, the projection of content into gaps. When it comes to Arjun, however, very little is taken for granted to fill that space. He would seem to demonstrate the outward signs of a cognitively complex and socially engaged existence, and yet his family believes him to have no such access to their world. Even Suddha, who can understand Arjun perfectly well in the course of a normal conversation, is filled with anxiety by the ambiguity of what stands *behind* the things he says. How is it that all these people know so little about Arjun’s mind? Or, rather, how is it that they know so much, so strangely? What motivates and maintains this claim of conspicuous absence that seems so plainly dissonant with Arjun’s visible behaviors? And why is it that itinerant foreign backpackers, contextually dislocated and culturally illiterate, uniformly experience Arjun’s intelligence so differently than does his kin?

At least as far as I could ever tell, there was never anything about Arjun more particular than his deafness that led his neighbors and family members to understand him in such consistently marginal terms. To the contrary, everyone I talked to seemed to agree that he is exceptionally capable . . . as far as deaf people go. This compliment and its caveat formed a very familiar two-part refrain in my conversations with the hearing. Deaf people, it would seem, are never *typical* for those who know them. They are always above average, at least within the space of expectation carved by their deafness. This way of talking about the deaf was a concession, I think, one meant to demonstrate generosity to the marginal without ever opening the question of whether the logic of marginality itself might be cruel and misattributed. When pressed, my sources would usually agree that as a matter of principle deaf people could be capable of anything, but they would do so reluctantly. Perhaps hospitals in foreign countries could somehow augment deaf capacities, they would say, but at least around here the long tail of possibility is occupied only by exceptions to the rule.

This question of exceptions haunts both deaf people and deaf political movements. Helen Keller, for example, is at least as famous in rural Nepal as she is in urban America. This is likely due to her designation in the government social studies textbooks as a “Great Person in History.” Even decades

after leaving school, hearing people would recite for me with great enthusiasm the one-sentence biography they had learned by rote: *Helen Keller was the first deaf and blind woman in the world to earn a bachelor's degree*. Though this prominence in the curriculum was undoubtedly meant as a gesture of inclusion towards people with disabilities, in practice it has become more a liability than an asset for deaf Nepal. Keller's life was indeed remarkable. She was centrally involved in many of the twentieth century's most important transformations in education, labor, and personhood. Without this context, however, her biography serves only to emphasize how singular she was as an educated individual. It is a beautiful and compelling story, but when familiar things like bachelor's degrees demand nothing less than international greatness from the deaf, it is far too easy to expect very little from the deaf boy or deaf girl living next door.

The cold reality is that these low expectations in fact often come to be self-fulfilling. Nepal is a country with very little public infrastructure, and its economic circumstances are especially stark for deaf children. Most never gain access to specialized education, and even those who do often have very little interaction with deaf adults. Consequently, only a small percentage of deaf people in Nepal ever learn Nepali Sign Language. Some come to speak and understand spoken Nepali through its visual cues—so-called “lipreading”—but acquiring language in this way is both arduous and technical. For most deaf Nepalis most of the time, the languages that surround them are met only as fragments and patches. As a result, the majority of Nepal's deaf children grow up never learning *any* language fluently. The cognitive and social effects of this isolation are devastating (Mayberry and Eichen 1991; Meier 1991; Dyssegaard 2000; Crowe, Gimire, and Trollo 2016).

Arjun, of course, is anything but linguistically isolated, but it is here that we might begin to see the terms in which his ostensible inabilities are anticipated. In an environment of far too familiar linguistic deprivation, it is telling that the conversations I witnessed about him so often began and ended with the observation that he lacks “voice” (āwaj). This statement was always met with knowing nods and sighs of pity. In South Asia, there are few things more closely identified with a person's capacity to think, act, and accomplish than speech (Kunreuther 2006). Voice offers both a metaphor and the basic mechanism of social action, and to be without voice is thus to occupy both the symbol and the substance of an especially forceful kind of social paralysis. Much like the English word *dumb*, the word most commonly used to refer to the deaf in colloquial

Nepali — *lāṭo*²— also serves as a more general epithet for the stubborn and the stupid. This overlap has wide and consistent implications. In everything from folk tales to modern sitcoms, the deaf are paradigmatic fools.

It is worth noting that the same rules seem not to apply to the blind, however. When hearing people shared with me their day-to-day experiences with disability, their stories were filled with blind savants and deaf village idiots, blind holy men and deaf wretches, or blind friends and deaf people who just happened to live nearby. The blind were frequently the heroes or villains of the tales I heard, while the deaf typically had too little presence of self to amount to either. Blindness was an affliction, to be sure, but in the accounts I heard, its basis of suffering was often tempered by something more fundamentally positive: a transcendence above material banalities, an access to a truer wisdom, or even a higher order of sense perception (cf. Miles 2001). A distant cousin of Arjun's, for example, is both blind and well known in the area as a skilled musician. The people I asked about him were vehement that he would be nowhere near as talented as he is if he could see. As Arjun's mother put it, "He can hear things that others can't." When I asked her if Arjun could likewise *see* things that she and I couldn't, she merely seemed confused. I asked again, and she thought for a moment before finally replying, "Like what?" Indeed, where blindness is most notable for its power to transform, deafness is perceived merely as a lack.

These narrative framings are powerful, but in the rest of this chapter I will argue that ideologies are never enough to explain how the hearing experience deafness. Instead, to know Arjun is to know him through a range of social entanglements. He is not only deaf but also a son, a husband, and a hotel owner, and his every encounter with those around him is shaped by the intersections of these relationships. Any claim about Arjun as a deaf man must likewise be read in the context of these diverse frameworks of coherence: as a tutor for deaf children, as a consumer of middle-class lifestyle goods, as an employer in the tourism service industry, as a young husband very much in love, and as a potential father ambivalent about the future. Amidst these patterned histories of interaction, it is not simply that Arjun's family members *think* he is a simpleton; they experience him as such at some moments but not at others, and they persist in maintaining this organization of their experiences throughout the course of

2. As in many other places, the term most often translated as "the deaf" in Nepal more literally means "the mute," as it is their inability to speak rather than their inability to hear that serves to define the class.

a lifetime of interactions with him. Though this separation of identity and efficacy may seem paradoxical, it is ultimately a tension basic to the problem of personhood. The deafness of Arjun is not uniform but rather carves a shape in space and time.

Arjun's language notebooks offer a particularly clear illustration of how this complexity unfolds in context. Over months and years, these books have been filled with a vast collection of words and phrases shared by a diversity of native speakers, and as guides to foreign languages they have become a tremendous resource to the family business. Everyone in the household relies on them for the day-to-day demands of communicating with customers. At any given moment, a dozen different notebooks will lie scattered about the public spaces of the hotel, conspicuously disruptive of the otherwise tidy aesthetic. Given how disorganized the notebooks are, it is remarkable to me that anyone could ever find them useful, but Arjun knows the contents of each book intimately. Increasingly, his parents do too. They know, for example, that many words and phrases about food in Korean can be found at the end of the hardback with the eagle on the cover, and that the especially tattered blue notebook is mostly French. On one occasion, I even saw Arjun's mother frantically search the reception desk in a frustrated rage when she couldn't find the notebooks. She needed to explain a particularly complicated bill to a tourist, and she was lost without the translations they offered. These engagements demonstrate an unexpected separation between the efficacy of the things that Arjun *does* and the sort of person he is assumed to *be*. Arjun's notebooks *work*, and they are *useful* as guides to foreign languages, but nevertheless they do not render his interior complexity visible. Instead, not knowing Arjun is a complexly structured act, mediated by elaborate patterns of what the hearing do and don't see about him.

However relentless narratives about Arjun and his abilities might seem to be, the way his family members perceive him in social context does not ultimately depend on what he is and isn't able to *do*. To properly understand these dynamics, we need to think about Arjun and his opacity as an ethnographic problem. The issue here is far more layered and far more broadly involved than any survey of attitudes about deafness can reveal. Instead, Arjun is experienced by those around him through countless daily interactions, each individually minuscule and ideologically habituated. Though it is convenient to characterize these interactions in broad terms—pity, derision, misrecognition, dismissal, neglect—I think it is also a mistake. These descriptive organizations are coherent only retrospectively, and they serve more generally to erase the patterns of perception

and notice that carve out a space for Arjun's deafness in the hearing world. In the course of any given day, Arjun moves through complexly organized regimes of coherence and incoherence, recognition and invisibility, and specificity and lack. It is these patterned ways of seeing, more than any single narrative, that shape how he is knowable to those around him.

LINGUISTIC DILEMMAS

To trace these patterns of perception from Arjun's perspective, we need look no further than the dilemma he faces in language. Arjun is one of the roughly five thousand fluent speakers of Nepali Sign Language (NSL). It is, in every respect, his primary language. It is the language he prefers for political debate, and it is the language he swears in when he drops something heavy on his foot. Nobody in Arjun's family has ever encountered NSL except through him, and only Suddha has come to understand it with any degree of competency. There is nothing odd about these limitations on their access. Like all languages, NSL is something that must be learned to be known. It is anchored to the very particular histories of a very particular speech community in Kathmandu, and using it effectively requires a specific and acquired knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and discursive conventions. It is not, in other words, just pantomime.

What is strange is that no one in Arjun's family really seems to know that. They don't know, specifically, that Arjun knows a language that they do not. They can communicate with him effectively enough about basic topics in something that *feels* like signing to them, so the question of actually *learning* NSL doesn't really occur to them as necessary. Instead, their communication is built from what they call "natural signs": correspondences of visual form and meaning that strike them as obvious enough to be taken for granted. To reference a cow, for example, they simply think about what a cow looks like—it has horns—and they recreate these features visually in hopes of communicating the concept. Though some limited formal conventions have started to emerge within the household, the bulk of what Arjun's family members call "sign language" is assembled from precisely this kind of flexible creativity. The family "cow" might be referenced by one gestural shape one day and another the next, and all claims, questions, or commands about a particular cow in the here-and-now tend to be limited to visually oriented adjectives and a handful of very kinetic verbs. Arjun's family members would likely have no difficulty indicating that their particular

cow has bolted off towards the south, for example, but they would struggle to explain that they regard cows generally as sacred because they embody the selfless giving of motherhood. According to this framework of expectations, signing functions much like a game of charades, and the set of visual intuitions that make this game possible comprise the entire scope of what Arjun's family members understand his language to be.

Suddha offers a limited exception to this very ad hoc way of engaging the question of NSL, but even her signing slides surprisingly easily between aspects of the Kathmandu standard she has picked up from Arjun and her own real-time innovations. More importantly even, she makes no distinction whatsoever between these two very different circumscriptions of Arjun's linguistic experiences. Indeed, when I asked Suddha why she thought she was able to communicate with her husband better than anyone else could, she made no mention of having *learned* his language or anything else. Instead, she noted that she and Arjun were close, and she speculated that this closeness caused their talk to "fit" (*najik bhaera hāmro kurā milchha*). Contrary to a broader intuition in Nepal that language maps ethnic identity (see chapter 3), Arjun's signing is experienced even by those closest to him as something that needs neither history nor community to work. That's the point. As with everything else about him, Arjun's communicative practices are perceived as broadly self-evident, emergent unmediated from his present experiential state and thus free of anything resembling the self-consciousness necessary for explicit convention. When Arjun's family members call his signs "natural," then, what they are saying is that they demonstrate neither more nor less than the universal human capacity to find meaning in the visual contours of the world.

The most remarkable fact is that this understanding *does* work for them, sort of. It works because of a very particular fact about sign language signs: in context, signs often *resemble* the things they mean. They are not freely gestural, but they are frequently *iconic*. The NSL dictionary entries for "elephant," "water," "mountain," "red," and "trekking porter," for example, bear striking similarities to qualities of these things that are salient to deaf and hearing Nepalis alike (figures 1–5).³ Elephants have trunks, water is poured into the mouth, mountains make a triangular shape, red powder is frequently placed between the eyes,

3. All line drawings of NSL signs in this book were created by Pratigya Shakya for the *Nepali Sign Language Dictionary* (Nepali Sign Language National Development Committee 2003), discussed in greater detail in chapter 3.

and porters carry loads with a strap across their foreheads. Fast and fluent signing is always opaque to outsiders, but in isolation many well-formed sentences aren't. This is especially true when they are assembled carefully in ways meant to be accessible to the hearing. To precisely these ends, when Arjun signs with his family, he must always be cognizant of how they interpret his signs, and he uses these judgments to select vocabulary that he expects will make him easily



हाती

Figure 1. ELEPHANT



पानी

Figure 2. WATER



हिमाल

Figure 3. MOUNTAIN



Figure 4. RED



Figure 5. PORTER

understood. In these moments, I don't think it is useful or interesting to suggest that these family members are speaking a "language," least of all NSL; but what about Arjun? How should we think about *his* communicative practices as they engage his nondeaf family? Arjun's language at home is clearly different to his language in Kathmandu, but it is much more difficult to say exactly how.

Deaf languages have existed as far back as our records go, but it was not until the 1960s that hearing people really started to *notice* them consistently. People knew, of course, that the deaf sometimes used their hands to communicate, and philosophers as far back as Plato even used this fact to illustrate far-reaching claims about the nature of the human mind (Plato 2008). Yet, even as scholars

saw deaf people *using* sign, they paid remarkably little attention to the fact of sign itself. Instead, across this long history, signing was taken for granted as something inevitable, not built from anything contextual or historically particular but rather a universal set of natural gestures available to anyone with eyes. There was nothing, in other words, particularly deaf about sign, except perhaps for the fact that deaf people needed it. Now, in linguistically minded circles at least, it is widely understood that signed languages are indeed languages in every technical and functional sense. They have grammars, vocabularies, and histories of change that are uniquely their own. All of these things were always there, of course. They might have been noticed at any time, but it wasn't until the hearing started looking for deaf language that it came to be seen.

As a consequence of this history, perhaps, the name “Nepali Sign Language” has led many to assume that NSL draws its base from spoken Nepali, translating an otherwise acoustic language into a manual and visual medium. This is flatly incorrect. In reality, NSL seems to have emerged directly from its earliest community of deaf users, with no clear hereditary links to any other language, spoken or signed. That's not to say that speakers of NSL lack access to the other languages around them. To the contrary, they are surrounded constantly by Nepali and other spoken languages, and, as a direct consequence of this environment, their language possesses numerous conventions for drawing spoken-language words into the signing channel. Fingerspelling, for example, allows signers to recreate letter sequences from either the Roman or the Devanagari alphabets manually, but its use is limited largely to loan words and proper nouns. A signer might fingerspell the name P-E-T-E-R to introduce me, for example, but any further account of my being hearing, American, an anthropologist, and so on, would use signs with no ties to the structure of either Nepali or English. Apart from these very limited interfaces designed explicitly to shift words across modalities, the two languages share effectively zero formal structure. Instead, NSL's linguistic history is built from distinctly deaf histories of interaction.

In Darjeeling, a Nepali-speaking city in India, for example, deaf signers do not use NSL but instead *another* language that is itself also largely autonomous (R. J. Johnson and Johnson 2016). Owing to the rise in recent years of deaf YouTube channels, however, Kathmandu- and Darjeeling-based signers are often able to communicate with each other in a pidgin drawn from American Sign Language (ASL). American Sign Language and British Sign Language, meanwhile, bear little resemblance to each other, despite their shared context of English. Instead, ASL is closely related to the languages used by signers in

both France and Russia, and as a consequence of this history deaf Nepalis might have an easier time communicating with deaf Russians than with their neighbors across the Indian border to the south or the Chinese border to the north. The geography here gets complicated very quickly, but there is no explanation for its shape more general than history. The distribution of linguistic diversity around the world is the consequence of accumulated patterns of migration and exchange, and sometimes these patterns are very different for the deaf than for the hearing. It is these complex social relationships, ultimately, that Arjun's family members fail to see, and it is the absence of this social history that allows his language to appear as no more than gesture.

In this regard, Arjun's family members are not alone. Since the rise of signed language linguistics in the 1960s and 1970s, a great deal of ink has been spilled trying to disambiguate language from gesture. Since Arjun's family members have never learned NSL as a language, what they use to communicate with him would generally be understood as gestural, though perhaps also partially conventionalized enough to constitute what has been called a "homesign system" (Senghas and Coppola 2001; Goldin-Meadow 2005b; Brentari et al. 2012). The idea here would be that Arjun participates in two distinct though sometimes blended communicative systems. The first would be a constraint-driven architecture of arbitrary rules and forms, comprising grammar and vocabulary in the traditional sense. The second, in contrast, would be an emergent system of pantomime, which imagines communication much more broadly as a series of creatively functional techniques rather than linguistic code. To this bifurcated analysis, NSL is exactly the first system disambiguated from the second. NSL is, specifically, the thing fluent signers do with each other and not what happens at the boundaries of deaf and hearing worlds. What extent of transparency exists in NSL proper then would be a relic of its gestural past, a historical legacy of etymological processes that has been supplanted by and shouldn't be confused with the real stuff of linguistic structure. In this analysis, sign language is language precisely to the extent that it has ceased to be gestural.

The trouble is, it is not at all clear that this distinction between language and gesture is meaningfully present in what Arjun does when he signs. Consider the sign for "water" (figure 2 above). Is it a sign or a gesture? It is used identically by both Arjun and his family members, and thus it is impossible to make a distinction in purely formal terms. Yet, clearly, there is a great deal at stake in being able to say that Arjun knows NSL but his family members do not. We could argue, perhaps, that the formational properties of WATER constitute a

linguistic lexical item for Arjun but a pantomimed gesture for his family members (or, perhaps, a lexical item in Kathmandu but a gesture at home), but at the end of it all, it is not obvious what these asymmetries of function accomplish for us analytically. This demands a complex analysis, but it also boils down to a simple fact: though the theoretical stakes of making these two speech contexts categorically different are very high, I can't say that I ever saw Arjun sign something to his parents that wouldn't have been a well-formed sentence in Kathmandu as well. NSL is governed by a rich and multiply layered body of conventions, but it is remarkably difficult to outline the boundaries around it.

This ambiguity puts Arjun in a difficult position. Because his family members can understand what he is saying some of the time, seemingly without effort or foreknowledge, the moments in which they don't take on a strange perceptual salience. As an experience of the senses, the partial access Arjun's family members have to NSL stands in sharp contrast to the total opacity of Japanese, English, or French. This difference between spoken and signed language was often explicit in my interviews with the hearing. Arjun and I, as proficient signers, generally spoke to each other in a standard dialect of Kathmandu NSL, full of lexical, syntactic, and discursive conventions that are unknown by and thus inaccessible to Arjun's mother. Yet, on more than one occasion, she commented that the reason she could not understand us was because we were signing "too fast." When slowing down the conversation didn't help, she suggested that perhaps our time in Kathmandu had made our thinking sloppy. The words and signs that she cannot extract from Arjun's speech become noise in a signal otherwise assumed to be transparent. Arjun's language, in this sense, is both too familiar and too alien to be identified as an independent linguistic form like Nepali, English, Japanese, or Gurung. Instead, it appears as a prosthesis—a way for the deaf to access not *language* but rather the *effects* of language in the hearing world. The idea that Arjun's signing could be conventional or even grammatical simply doesn't feel necessary to his family to explain the fact that it *works*.

This places both Arjun's family members and the linguists of signed languages in precisely the same epistemological dilemma: attempts to disambiguate signed language from signed gestures must necessarily turn to questions of history, of why a sign and a meaning serve to correspond. The NSL sign for "water" and the idiosyncratic gesture occasionally used by Arjun's family are visually identical, even as they emerge from very different histories of use. They cannot be distinguished from each other as forms unto themselves but rather only through attention to the processes by which each came to be. Because

signed language and signed gesture coexist so seamlessly in linguistic practice, however, Arjun's family members are at risk of perceiving the particularity of neither. Ultimately, they take their lack of comprehension to indicate a lack of content. They don't know that they don't know sign language.

We can now see Arjun's dilemma in its sharpest light: to be effective as a signer with his family, he must organize his speech in a way that narrows the conventional dimensions of his language radically. He must bear the burden of transparency for everyone around him, anchoring his words and expressions exclusively to a here-and-now of shared perception and memory. He must circumscribe his language to a history no larger than the one occupied by those immediately present. He must deny everything that makes NSL particular to a time, place, and community of practice. He must, in other words, confirm for his family members exactly what they already believe: that sign language is a transparent organization of basic shared experiences. This is profoundly unsatisfying for Arjun, to be sure. Nevertheless, it is a bind characteristic of being deaf in hearing worlds.

MAKING *SENSE*

As an interface between deaf and hearing worlds, Arjun's language is least well known when it is most easily understood. These paradoxical circumstances are organized by the very unusual conditions of interpretability that attend to NSL signs in context. Arjun may, at his discretion, present his language to those around him in ways that make it remarkably easy for nonsigners to understand, but in so doing he erases everything that is most particular about himself. This self-effacement is something that frustrates him, but being understood is often simply the more pressing necessity. By the weight of these accumulated moments, however, Arjun's family members settle into habituated patterns of seeing, anchored by their experiences of him as someone inevitably transparent. In the course of this perceptual history, their assessments of his abilities need not be hoisted on the back of particular narratives about disability because they feel already real enough to be taken for granted simply by the alignment of circumstances.

Here, we begin to see the shape of a much more general ethnographic theme. Though discursive framings are of course important to Arjun's broader story, they fail ultimately to explain his very unusual place in his family. Deafness is

not an *idea* underwriting cultural patterns of behavior. Instead, Arjun's experiences as a deaf man take their shape from the interactions of what those around him do and don't perceive in the spaces that they cannot directly see. In this regard, what constitutes Arjun as an unusual figure in hearing contexts is not the set of beliefs about him but rather the elaborate and particular dynamic of perception that makes him known. To track this cultural dynamic effectively, we need a better way of understanding the entanglements that establish people like Arjun and Suddha, things like dictionaries and solar panels, and unifying abstractions like language, intention, and meaning in relation to one another. We need to know, in other words, how it is that Arjun and his deafness take shape as objects of experience in hearing places.

Arjun's notebooks are an especially clear demonstration of this problem, highlighting the capacity of things to sometimes absorb and sometimes reflect the traces of their own social histories. From this starting point, we can begin to trace the terms by which the paradox of Arjun's identity and public efficacy is maintained. No one denies that Arjun's notebooks are useful, but this fact of utility does not force the hearing people in his life to evaluate the conditions of their useful possibility. Instead, they are experienced in terms shaped by the perception of a more fundamental lack within them. "They are only empty words," his mother once told me. "He has a good eye, and a good hand, and he can make [the letters] beautifully. But there isn't any *sense* in them." In this explanation, the word "sense" is especially conspicuous; it is not a gloss of a Nepali term but rather a loan from English, one that has taken on very distinct connotations in the contexts in which I encountered it. A person might be said to lack *sense* if he or she does foolish things, but equally the word might be applied to someone in a coma. In this alignment, what *sense* describes is something somewhere at the intersections of the *sensible* and the *sensing*.

Popular Hindi movies, for example, are often said to be high on production value, violence, and sex, but very low on *sense*. When I asked a friend (as many surely have before me) why a gangster started dancing in the middle of an epic gun battle, he responded dismissively: "Because the woman started dancing. There's no *sense* beyond that." He was directing my attention, in other words, to a kind of unity that exists from frame to frame but that is absent from scene to scene. In service of this distinction, *sense* reveals to us how actions are motivated and how events are tied to broader histories of meaning, offering a second-order coherence to the world shaped by perception and its first-order experience of things. More specifically, what *sense* articulates is a recognition that things

acquire the basis of their coherence from contexts larger than themselves. The word *sense* was frequently invoked by the hearing people I interviewed in this new and reorganized meaning. They used it to explain not only the deaf people in their lives, but also deaf actions, deaf effects, and the things the deaf have made. In this diversity of manifestations, what *sense* reveals is the engagements inherent among people and things, and thus its absence for the deaf implies not randomness but rather a lack of sensitivity to higher orders of context.

Consequently, when Arjun's mother describes her son as someone who lacks "sense," what she is saying is that she perceives something in him to be *missing*. She perceives, in other words, an absence where a presence should be. Though it is hard to identify exactly what form this presence ought to take, there is no question, I think, that it incorporates some aspect of his interiority. At its simplest, what Arjun lacks for those around him is the thing that would cause them to speculate about how to link his internal states to his observable behaviors. For example, if Arjun had *sense*, his family members would see purpose, knowledge, and agency in his tendency to fiddle with the solar panels. Instead, all they see is fiddling. This is a very unusual conditioning of perception. The difference between a wink and a twitch may be impossible to articulate concretely, but the capacity to perceive this difference in context is nevertheless precisely what makes social phenomena possible. It is a felt presence inhabiting actions, intangible but critical to how we engage the social world. This term "presence" has a long and tangled history in research on the nature of consciousness, but I am adopting it here for more basic and more overtly ethnographic ends: in social context, intentions are things; drives are real; the abstractions that people attribute to the world are just as consequential as any material form. The contours by which these shared objects of experience go seen or unseen ultimately determine how we identify what is most profoundly human in others. *Sense*, in this regard, is a very particular kind of substantiating presence, felt as real within the objects of hearing perception. About Arjun, for reasons that we must make clear, no such presence is perceived to exist.

It is this same encounter with emptiness that haunts Arjun's notebooks, and to understand the broader question of his senselessness we must understand the very contextual terms in which these notebooks are experienced. As tools for accessing foreign languages, Arjun's notebooks are convenient, accurate, and useful. As the product of a deaf individual, however, they take on characteristics that go beyond questions of mere utility. To Arjun's mother, for example, the fact that her son's notebooks *work* does not disrupt her intuition that they are filled

with what she calls “*nakali* [counterfeit/duplicate] letters.” The phrasing here is evocative, undoubtedly meant to carry with it imagery of the fake currency notes and knock-off electronics that infuse the region from across the nearby Chinese border. Though counterfeit things may be indistinguishable from the originals that they imitate, they are ultimately not *real* in some fundamental way, and this lack of realness stands as a tangible risk to anyone who mistakes them as such. The same word is used to describe inauthentic documents that are rejected by bureaucracies, for example, or to warn men against overly “fashionable” women (Shneiderman 2014). Critically, what distinguishes the real from the *nakali* is not any particular material property but rather a hidden but inescapably consequential social history, experienced as a basic and tangible part of things as they occupy the world. In these same terms, what is missing from Arjun’s notebooks is not attributable to any dimension of form or function. Rather, Arjun’s notebooks are *nakali* because they were made by Arjun.

What this framing of Arjun’s notebooks reflects is a way of relating to the ambiguities inherent in the experience of others. This question of the *nakali* is rooted in contemporary Nepal by histories that expand far beyond deafness. Everywhere, people are concerned that things are not as they seem. The anxiety is tangible, reflected in murmurs of conspiracy and unexpected spasms of public violence. These are hard times, and—as it was constantly articulated to me—even the most mundane decisions are made dangerous by a steady tension between real things and fake things and the increasing difficulties inherent in distinguishing the two. To a properly attentive mind, everything should be an object of scrutiny, from fake cookware that might explode and kill families to fake job advertisements that leave migrant workers stranded without documentation in hostile foreign countries. In these everyday moments, knowing how to tell if something presented as real is *actually* real can be mortally urgent.

Primetime sitcoms like *Jire Khursānī* (Hot Pepper) and *Tito Satya* (Bitter Truth) have leveraged this social dilemma into a distinct genre of satire, which articulates socioeconomic development as a conquest of the naïve by the savvy. Modernity, in this expression, is about knowing how to distinguish the actual from the simulated and, moreover, about the public ridicule that comes from failing to make these distinctions appropriately. The fate of those who lack such knowledge was demonstrated particularly clearly in one episode of *Tito Satya* that aired shortly after the end of Nepal’s decade-long civil war. The story centered on a middle-aged couple visiting Kathmandu for the first time from some unnamed hinterland village. Dressed in traditional clothing and sporting

lowbrow nasal accents, the couple decided to go see a movie. They were, however, unaware that the film was fiction. At the story's climax, they were devastated to see their favorite actress perish in a fire, a horror borne by the conviction that they had just seen a woman *actually* burn to death. Compounding this trauma was the lackadaisical response of the other movie-goers, who chatted, threw popcorn, and jeered at the screen. When it became clear that no one else would speak out against this act of murder, the couple fled the theater in a panic. They threw themselves at the feet of a mannequin in a shop window and begged it to help them find a police officer to whom they might report the crime they had witnessed. When the mannequin didn't respond, the husband began to shake it furiously until it fell over and broke into pieces. Again horrified, they ran pell-mell down the street only to stumble upon—*deus ex machina*—their beloved and very alive actress strolling casually down the street. Overcome with both relief and confusion, they embraced her and told her what they had seen. She laughed, consoled them with maternal words, and explained that the film was only imaginary. The program's final shot returned to the couple, slumped with fatigue and trying hard to seem relieved. At this point, the credits began to roll, and cheerful music removed all doubts that this was indeed a happy ending.

Though *Tito Satya* is decidedly populist in its aesthetics, its plot-lines are frequently drawn (and transformed) from the highbrow echelons of world literature. This particular story bears striking resemblance to a segment in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a novel popular among the class of young Nepali professionals who write teleplays. García Márquez tells a similar tale about a community of overly innocent villagers, faced with feelings of loss at the death of actors during a time of rapid modernization. In the Spanish-language novel, the story proceeds:

Dazzled by so many and such marvelous inventions, the people of Macondo did not know where their amazement began. They stayed up all night looking at the pale electric bulbs fed by the plant that Aureliano Triste had brought back when the train made its second trip, and it took time and effort for them to grow accustomed to its obsessive toom-toom. They became indignant over the living images that the prosperous merchant Bruno Crespi projected in the theater with the lion-head ticket windows, for the character who had died and was buried in one film and for whose misfortune tears of affliction had been shed would reappear alive and transformed into an Arab in the next one. The audience, who paid two cents apiece to share the difficulties of the actors, would not tolerate that

outlandish fraud and they broke up the seats. The mayor, at the urging of Bruno Crespi, explained in a proclamation that the cinema was a machine of illusions that did not merit the emotional outbursts of the audience. With that discouraging explanation many felt that they had been the victims of some new and showy gypsy business and they decided not to return to the movies, considering that they already had too many troubles of their own to weep over the acted-out misfortunes of imaginary beings. (García Márquez [1967] 2003, 223)

This misrecognition of imaginary beings as real ones is a familiar trope worldwide, but its effects in Macondo and Kathmandu are tellingly different. If this is indeed a remix (cf. Greene 2001; Williams 2012), it is one that shows just how little nostalgia contemporary Nepali scriptwriters have for the stakes of innocence. In Macondo, the idea that sin and death should be forgiven so easily causes offense to the villagers, but critically it inspires them to a *collective* rebellion. The lies of the silver screen are distressing, but ultimately they serve to reaffirm the values of the community, rejecting those of outsiders and reiterating the autonomy of the local. For the Nepali couple, however, the experience of mistaking the fake for the real is deeply isolating. This is a dark episode in their lives, reminding them of the unbridgeable distance between the naïve and the savvy. Though Macondo's villagers also fail to distinguish the real from the fake, their credulity is depicted as a source of nobility and strength. In Nepal, the same failures bring only dehumanizing trauma.

Nepali sitcoms of this genre have risen in prominence over the past two decades along with a rising cynicism about the reliability of knowledge. There is a self-consciousness about this shift, and people are quick to identify it if asked: “*ājkal, bishwās chhaina,*” they will say: these days, there is no belief/trust. The absence of trust is familiar in the literatures on modernity: for many, the displacements, shifts, and reorientations attendant on the spread of global capital networks are experienced as an equal and anxious skepticism about both old and new. In Nepal, this is revealed by a world of *Māobādīs* and *Khāobādīs*, Maoist insurgents who are sometimes hard to distinguish from the imitators (“*khāo*” = to eat) who use their name to commit grave acts of violence without a broader political agenda. Concern about this kind of sourceless violence is widespread and growing. In the wake of a particularly unprecedented spasm that left Kathmandu's most important mosque attacked and partially burned, for example, even some of the rioters themselves insisted to me that the violence must have been a ruse of the new king.

Critically, these anxieties have implications for finding good booze. As Frank Zappa almost said, to be a proper ethnic group in Nepal, one must not only make beer but also face accusations that one's beer is poisonous, prepared with unwholesome ingredients or sinister methods. The Tamang, it is alleged, make their *chhāng* with ground-up rubber sandals, and Newars make their *aylā* with shoe polish. Limbu women, we are told, make *tōngbā* exclusively while menstruating, and Tibetans will sometimes ferment human bone. In their quest for locally made alcohol, many middle-aged men I knew spent tremendous effort to maintain complex networks of trust along these distinctly ethnic lines.⁴ These anxieties emerge from the opacities of modern markets, and what is frustrating these days for many is that the old kinds of social networks increasingly fail to reveal what is and isn't as it seems (cf. Nakassis 2013). There's no use relying on taste or smell, either. As everyone savvy knows, acts of primary perception are just too fallible to be trusted; real alcohol is materially indistinguishable from the fake poisonous stuff.

Likewise, to separate the real from the fake in contemporary Kathmandu, it is not enough to know things through their observable properties. Rather, one must follow the substance to its source, walking through the transactions and translations that have brought the world's many things to be where they are. According to this frame of intuitions, the presence of an object is felt not just as a set of observable properties but, moreover, as an engagement with and consolidation of history. This basis of objecthood demands a very different kind of knowledge, one that displaces things from their ostensibly self-evident presence of form and reinvests them into variously large and variously conceptualized entanglements of context. Things are not self-sufficient unto themselves but rather exist as histories made tangible. When these histories are opaque, the *sense* of things is difficult to engage effectively.

As a way of framing the experience of social history in these terms, what *sense* reveals is thus an ontological intuition, one that extends the most perceptually tangible dimensions of forms, facts, and events into conceptual worlds. Without *sense*, things and actions are "empty," and this ever-present possibility of emptiness is what explains the gap between Arjun's obvious functional competencies and his ostensible deficits. When I asked Arjun's mother to elaborate

4. Paul Manning (2012) notes similar elaborations over beer brands in Georgia, suggesting that alcohol might be particularly available as a materialization of opaque histories.

on what she meant when she called him *senseless*, for example, she illustrated with an example: “When he was very small, he would become angry and violent. He had no reason for it. It was just anger without a source.” This was a period shortly before Arjun was sent to boarding school in Kathmandu. He was only five or six years old, but he would sometimes fight with the other children in the village, reportedly without cause. In the course of these fights, he would apparently become so enraged that his parents would lock him in his bedroom until he calmed down, sometimes hours later. It was this behavioral issue, more than any particular pedagogical instinct, that persuaded Arjun’s parents to seek options away from home. “He was angry, sad, or happy without reason,” his mother said. “The teachers at the school [in Kathmandu] have experience with this.” Arjun has a very different memory of things, of course, though he was usually reluctant to talk about his childhood with me. He described being cruelly mocked by the other children in the neighborhood, and he recalled bitterly that his mother failed to do anything about it. Far from unmotivated, Arjun explains his behavior as driven by intense isolation, confusion, and fear. Nevertheless, because his private experience remains for his family members so inaccessible as an underlying organization of purpose, his actions appear without *sense*. As his mother put it, “He has a body but no intellect (*buddhi*).”⁵

Arjun’s mother went on to describe another example meant to illustrate his lack of *sense*:

The horses love Arjun, because they know he has no *sense*. When he is kind to them, it is only kindness. But when I am kind to the horses, they are suspicious. If I give them carrots or brush them, they know that it is because I will soon stick them with a syringe or make them carry a particularly fat tourist. But Arjun is simple (*sojho*). What he does is what he means (*usle je gareko, te matlab*).

This turn of phrase, stipulating an inherent equivalence between deaf actions and meanings, was ubiquitous in my interviews with the hearing. The intuition

5. In Sanskrit philosophy, *buddhi* is generally presented in contrast to *manas*. In broad terms, both words mean “mind”, but *manas* refers specifically to a lower-order responsiveness engaged by the material world. It is responsible for such things as ego-construction and attraction to objects. *Buddhi*, in contrast, describes a higher, inherently reflexive aspect of the mind that is attuned to an ultimate reality. A being with *manas* but no *buddhi* would be a zombie of sorts, potentially able to act coherently but without any sense of higher purpose.

that stands behind it serves to dampen any impulse within Arjun's family to fill in the gaps left by his outward behavior. It explains why even his most complexly instrumental actions nevertheless remain "empty" (*khāli*), as his family members so often said. There is simply no drive for them to populate the open spaces of their fragmentary experience where he is concerned with higher-order coherences. Arjun—as a person without *sense*—is only and exactly as he appears to be.

For the horses, *sense* is a capacity for guile, the possibility that a caregiver's inward state and outward expression might be intentionally mismatched for his or her own strategic ends. For personal experience, *sense* is appropriateness, the contextual link that explains affect as a manifestation of broader dynamics of emotion. For written language, *sense* is purpose, the use of text to constitute an act of communication that goes beyond the mere reproduction of form. Together, what these distinctions reveal is a sophisticated intuition made tangible in very everyday cultural practices. People in Nepal know that things never stand for themselves; they know there's always a greater story. *Sense* is the underlying intuition of this entanglement.⁶ Though a copier and a writer may produce identical written forms on an identical page, only the writer has *sense* because only the writer has invested those forms with *intention*. In these terms, *sense* is the presence of agency congealed by social objects in context, a hidden logic that cannot be seen directly but nevertheless must be experienced as real for social actions and social things to cohere amidst the noise of perceptual realities. To participate in regimes of *sense* is thus to engage in a form of embodiment-for-others, presenting the self as sensitive to both the material and the social organizations of being simultaneously. This is, one might argue, a particularly sharp definition of culture, but critically it is one to which Arjun stands as an exception. Arjun does not have *sense* like others do because, as his family understands him, he does not allow for questions of existence to be mediated by social facts, histories, and regimes of shared perception. He is, instead, so radically transparent that preconceptions are unnecessary to know him.

6. *Sense* is, in this, notably related to Frege's use of the term (or, more accurately, the use of the term by Frege's translators) (Frege 1997). In the categories of South Asian philosophy, this is also (and perhaps more robustly) related to Bhartrihari's notion of *sphoṭa*, an expression of irreducible meaningful efficacy that emerges from language but cannot be reduced to the sum of its constituents (Rath 2000). In this distinctly South Asian vernacular, *sense*—like *sphoṭa*—is the whole that displaces its own parts (Coward 1997).

It is here that Arjun finds himself with respect to his family, exempt from all normal cultural assumptions that project actions into intentions, events into narratives, presences into things, and instances into categories. As a senseless self, Arjun is immediate, reactive, and imitative. He produces correctly things like kindness to animals, expressions of anger, and foreign words, but to those around him these actions neither require nor allow contextualization beyond an immediate frame of reference. Arjun treats the horses kindly, but his kindness is a disposition without purpose; he is angry, but his anger is affect without emotion; he writes, but his writing is code without content. Because Arjun's *behaviors* are experienced as so directly transparent, because they *feel* self-explanatory to those around him, there is no benefit to be had in speculating about higher-order coherences like purpose, meaning, or mind because—simply put—everything he does can be explained well enough without them. No matter what he does, his actions do not serve as *indications* of an extended self but rather stand, sufficient, as total facts. Arjun thus inhabits an unenviable place in a world of pure presences, one that denies consequence to everything except that which is immediately seen. He is an exception, in other words, to the general *sense* of things. In the most perverse and dehumanizing way possible, Arjun is completely free.

THE PRESENCE OF ARJUN

There is a piece to this story that still puzzles me. Arjun, for reasons I am only beginning to understand, shows no interest whatsoever in disabusing his family members of their misconceptions. This is unusual, to say the least. Over the last two decades especially, young and educated deaf people like Arjun have risen up as a collective movement, fighting to tear down the various attitudes, terminologies, and policies that push deaf voices into the margins. Under the banner of this new and boundlessly optimistic activism, the task of “awareness raising” (NSL: *thumb and index finger join at the temple, then separate as eyes open wide*) is consistently articulated as an almost sacred duty. Within these circles, stories about deaf people who are first identified as simpletons only to later shatter that characterization through some display of virtuosity have come to constitute something of a narrative genre in their own right. Arjun himself shared many such stories with me from his time in Kathmandu, and yet here at home—among the people most immediately consequential to his life—he

was unexpectedly quiet. When I asked him why, he shrugged my questions off. When I asked if he wanted me to take any messages back to his friends in Kathmandu, he requested that I not tell anyone that I saw him. If I decided to write about him, he wanted me to change his name (which I have done).

Arjun is angry, particularly with his mother. The precise contours of this experience are likely too personal to be accessible to ethnography directly, except perhaps through Sapir's famous admonition that anthropologists need psychoanalysts (Sapir [1938] 2001). Whatever dynamics of mind and emotion might be at play, however, the particular ways in which the relationship between Arjun and his mother has broken down are telling: Arjun has elected to remain unintelligible. He has allowed his mother to persist in her nonperception of his mind, and in doing so he has excluded her from one of the most important identities in deaf organizations of kinship: the mother whose child has taught her what it really means to be deaf. In denying his mother access to that experience, he is keeping his world to himself.

Arjun's mother loves her son deeply. She talks about him constantly, and she worries about whether he is happy. And Arjun loves her too. He worries about her health, and in our conversations he wondered with unconcealed heartache about whether he will be able to care for her as she gets older. Though they frequently fight, he never once uttered a harsh word about her to me. His decision to leave her and everyone else in the dark about who he is thus cannot be dismissed as mere lack of care or interest. Instead, what we should see in this choice, and what we see consistently in Arjun's way of engaging with his family members, is something much more particularly deaf.

When I first met Arjun, he was preoccupied by an ambitious project to restructure his phrasebooks. As he explained to me, the purpose of this work was to replace the disorder that had accumulated over the previous few years with something more interesting and more useful. In their old form, Arjun's notebooks were organized by the chronology of their construction. When he met a new speaker of a foreign language willing to sit down with him for a few minutes, he would draw a horizontal line below where his previous work had ended, and he would proceed to elicit whatever words and phrases he could. Leafing through these old notebooks sequentially thus reveals a telling biography, cataloging the people Arjun met and the various vocabularies he happened to find interesting at the time. The new system, in contrast, would be organized by principles of meaning, each page designating a phrase or small group of words that could be populated with their particular instantiations in all the

various languages he could encounter. He had started to implement this new system in his notebooks. Under a section header labeled “Smoking, drinking, and food,” for example, one page contained the phrase “How much is a pack of cigarettes?” in eleven languages. Another page in another section asked “Where is the hospital?” in eight, and still another informed “Yaks do not live at this elevation” in English, Dutch, and Chinese. This new organization manifests a very different dimension of language as a social fact. In the old system, language is a contextual production issued by particular speakers at particular moments of history; in the new system, language is an almost mechanical alignment of forms and meanings.

So what do we make of this? Is Arjun’s work to reorganize his language notebooks just an attempt to maximize their utility? Perhaps, but given the countless hours that he has poured into this project, it seems unlikely that the depth and unusual character of his focus are merely incidental. Is there, perhaps, something far more *deaf* about this engagement with language? I think so, but to see it I think we need an explicitly ethnographic analysis of Arjun’s sensitivities to hearing patterns of perception.

In their new organization, Arjun’s notebooks demonstrate a clear interest in the experience of specificity and difference. They carefully document the fact that Japanese, French, Dutch, and Australian speakers say the same things with different words. These various nationalities might all equivalently want a cup of tea or directions to the next town, for example, but they will express these meanings through different sequences of sound. Equivalent desires, in other words, often manifest as different kinds of linguistic behavior in context. To someone in the possession of a universal phrasebook, however, linguistic patterns of variation whittle down to something far more atomic and isolable. A German might ask to go to the hospital in a distinctly German way (and perhaps even for distinctly German reasons), but once stripped of these cultural and linguistic conventions such a request is potentially no more German than Korean, Hebrew, or Italian. Arjun’s meticulous organization of these inscriptions is thus an act of systematic reduction, the making transparent of correspondence between forms and meanings that can, in the course of habitualized use, collapse into each other. Someone who wants to go to the hospital certainly has a story to tell, but the bare act of telling a story makes *sense* only through these lateral entanglements of social context. By reducing these phrases to their most bare equivalences, Arjun is making salient a very particular way of experiencing linguistic opacity. He is suggesting that, with the right frame of attention, acts of

speech can be lined up for display like so many artifacts in a museum (Boas 1940). He thus prompts us to ask a very unsettling question: Once we begin to strip away the contextual entanglements from the words in the way that dictionaries do, what is left of the communities that created them?

Perhaps nothing, and perhaps that is the point. Arjun's notebooks are a shrine to translation and translatability—tabulating, ritualizing, and giving presence to contextual meanings and arbitrary codes. This is a deeply personal celebration of and solution to the problem of equivalence that the experience of words in context sometimes serves to hide. Arjun has honed a technique of mind that displays the association of form and intention in its barest state. In so doing, he is manipulating the *sense* of language. He is manipulating, in other words, exactly the thing that those around him believe he cannot even perceive. If Arjun's language is *nakali* to his family because of its ostensible transparency, theirs can just as easily be dismissed for its displacement to something no more complex than a spreadsheet. He is trivializing spoken language by making it look easy. He is, in this regard, making their words *senseless* in exactly the way they assume him to be.

Paradoxically, what makes Arjun unknowable to his family is just how easily he is known. Because nothing he does would seem to require explanation, everything about him that is not immediately available to the senses dissolves into inconsequentiality. His family members do not experience as present the entanglements that make him a social being, and because of these nonperceptions Arjun is caught in a cage of transparency. The things that those around him fail to see define the limits of everything that is possible, and these patterns of possibility and impossibility carve deep grooves of habit that circumscribe his capacity for effective social action. In these terms, fundamental categories like agency, meaning, coherence, intention, and commensurability should be understood not as already existing things for Arjun's family to recognize but rather as the emergent phenomenological consequences of their culturally particular way of *seeing* him.

To these ends, *sense* is a nuanced intuition about how social relationships inhabit things. It's a theory of being with rich texture but also remarkable blind-spots. Arjun—as a consequence of who he is—must navigate the landscape these blind-spots create. In the rest of this book, I will argue that his sensitivities to these dynamics are fundamentally characteristic of deaf cultural practices in hearing Nepal. Specifically, as a deaf man in a nondeaf household, Arjun has cultivated a nuanced attention to the contours of what the hearing do and don't

perceive in the world around them. He understands how hearing people engage things that are neither present through form nor available to the senses, and he uses these understandings to foreground social processes that more often than not are simply taken for granted. Arjun's dictionary, for example, is most powerful for its capacity to engineer an experience of both *sense* and *senselessness* in those who use it: words may appear naturally as meanings, behaviors may appear naturally as intentions, and things may appear naturally as causes or effects. But there is nothing inevitable about how any of this plays out. Our intuitions of *sense* entangle people, things, and intentions together, but the particular ways by which this happens end up motivated less by the world as it is than by the culturally embedded ways in which we choose to populate it with vessels of attention. In constructing a universal phrasebook for his family to encounter, Arjun is demonstrating his own radical way of attending to the social nature of things.

By refusing to resolve himself coherently before hearing ways of seeing, I think Arjun offers us an unusual answer to a very familiar deaf dilemma: Is it possible, ultimately, for deaf organizations of *sense* to persist in hearing worlds? Can hearing things act as vessels of deaf forms of value? To see these dimensions of Arjun's dictionary effectively, we need a better way to theorize the problem of *sense*, reorienting our ethnographic engagements around the problem of presence and distinction. How is it that social actors are able to evaluate apparently similar facts, acts, and things as equivalent or not on the basis of the histories of their production? What makes a senseful thing different from a seemingly identical senseless one? These tensions, I will argue, underpin the high stakes of cultural difference, and in this book my primary aim is to share the remarkable insights that people like Arjun bring to them. By intervening in how these tensions unfold for his family, he is revealing—to those who know how to see it—an account of what it means to be deaf in hearing Nepal.