

SARIKA

India's deaf community is fighting hard for their rights and autonomy!

The Indian Sign Language Research and Training Center, the ISLRTC, is an academic institution that promotes the use of Indian Sign Language, Deaf Culture and Bilingualism for professionals working with deaf children. But more than that, it's a symbol of Deaf pride in India and stands as a validation for their language and existence.

Since 2007, the community has been fighting to run this center autonomously. However, on April 21st, the Indian government decided the center should be run by the NIHH, the National Institute of the Hearing Handicapped. This is the government agency which focuses on deaf needs, but purely from a medically-based, rehabilitative model. This decision unexpectedly came yesterday, despite strong objection from the Deaf Indian community.

But the fight is not over.

Yesterday, I reported this story in-depth, on KBOO's *Political Perspective* show. I contacted the NIHH twice, but I'm still waiting for a response. Following the decision, I spoke with Madan Vasishta, chief officer of the ISLRTC and author of two memoirs, *Deaf in Delhi* and *Deaf in DC*. For this story, Ramesh Chandrasekharan provided voiceover. With 85 deaf leaders from all over India, Madan met with 5 cabinet ministers in New Delhi for two days on March 15 and 16th. The ministers assured the Deaf community that they would support autonomy for the ISLRTC. On Tuesday, the Indian government granted control of the ISLRTC to the NIHH. He expressed his disappointment:

MADAN

We waited for a month for the decision and now the center will be run be under control of the NIHH. NIHH has a very negative history of supporting deaf people, deaf culture or ISL. It is totally focused on hearing aids, speech therapy and cochlear implants. Unless, it is open to hiring skilled deaf people and experts who know ISL, sign linguistics, interpreting, ISLRTC will suffer and will not achieve the goals for which it was established.

SARIKA

This fight is not over. The Deaf community intends to protest this decision, possibly on April 27th. But they need support.

MADAN

At present it is planned for April 27th, however, it is short time and we may have to postpone a week or so. It is getting very hot in Delhi and the temperature will hit three digits soon. The National Association of the Deaf leaders are working hard, planning and finding a date. It takes weeks to find a seat in trains especially now with schools closing. Deaf people coming from Kolkata, Kerala, Chennai and other distant places will have problems. There are lot of logistics to take care of.

SARIKA

While I was in Mumbai, India, in March, I met with a deaf couple, Sunil and Shweta Sahasrabudhe. Both are fluent signers of Indian Sign Language and proud of their deaf culture. Sunil has been on the ground with the fight. Shweta gave me insight into the lives of Deaf Indians.

Unfortunately there was no available interpreter for our interview, so they agreed to use spoken English on the microphone. For the purpose of this story, Vainateya Deshpande for Sunil and Shruti Deshpande provided voiceover for Shweta.

One of the goals of the ISLRTC is influence policy decisions in the lives of Deaf people, such as the workplace. Shweta describes her struggles as a deaf person at her job:

#### SHWETA

My boss sent me to a 4 or 5 day training and I sat through entire lectures that I didn't understand. I didn't understand anything. We NEED interpreters! Maybe the ISLRTC will force the companies to get them. Maybe ISLRTC will make them understand what deaf people actually need. Then deaf people can enjoy the work environment and share their opinions. They are not dumb! They can share their opinions through sign language. But hearing people don't understand.

#### SARIKA

This is just one example of why Deaf Indians feel so passionately about the Indian Sign Language Research and Training Center. Sunil explains how the ISLRTC can direct policy and change the negative perception of deaf people in India.

#### SUNIL

When we mix with hearing people, they look down at deaf because they think "deaf people get jobs because of reservations", they think deaf aren't smart enough. Because there is a communication gap. That is why we need interpreters. But who will pay? The government and private companies won't pay. Some deaf people will pay for their own interpreters and get access that way. But this should not be the case for every deaf person. So the ISLRTC could direct the government to provide interpreters so everyone can have access.

We are not even able to get 5% of what is shared. It is difficult to live with the hearing world. There is too little information and thinking that ... hearing people look at us like we are dumb, stupid. We feel depressed. We feel like this is not the way we are. We can be different. But we need to close the communication gap. The ISLRTC will help create awareness so the lives of deaf people will get better.

#### SARIKA

Although the Indian government decided to merge the ISLRTC with the NIHH, the fight is not over. Madan tells listeners how they can support Deaf Indians' fight for autonomy:

#### MADAN

Visit the website [www.ISLRTCnow.com](http://www.ISLRTCnow.com). Spread the word! Share the links for FaceBook and the website with others. Contact people with influence and clout to ask higher ups to listen to deaf people. We will need money for the protest, so we will welcome donations. Please encourage your friends to contribute. Even \$5 will go a long way. The fight is just starting. Deaf people in India have been treated worse than slaves and it is time that the government woke up and followed on UNCRPD which it has ratified and RPWD which is in the Parliament now. Again, visit [www.ISLRTCnow.com](http://www.ISLRTCnow.com). Thank you all for your support!

SUNIL

There is a famous quote by deaf American, George Veditz: As long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs. In that context, yes... we keep signing and we'll pass sign language from generation to generation. But in the context of our case, we know that there are 10 million Indian Sign Language users. But still we feel that if we have the ISLRTC as an autonomous center, it would be perfect, solid proof of our language and culture. So I want to see it set up in 1-2 years. Until then, we keep fighting!

For KBOO News, I'm Sarika Mehta.