

SARIKA

**India's deaf community is fighting for their right to language and independence! In 2007, the Indian government approved the establishment of the Indian Sign Language Research and Training Center (ISLRTC). This would serve as an academic institution for deaf people, promoting Indian Sign Language, deaf culture and bilingualism. The goal is to have a center somewhat like Gallaudet University in Washington DC, the world's only deaf university.**

**But achieving this center, autonomously run by deaf Indians - that road has not been easy.**

**Currently, the National Institute for the Hearing Handicapped (NIHH), is set to take control of the ISLRTC, despite the strong objection from the deaf community.**

**Deaf Indians face discrimination in the workplace and have no access to communication due to a lack of interpreter services. There are Indian laws and United Nations conventions which recognize the rights and participation of people with disabilities, and India's government is breaking both laws.**

**As the Indian National Association of the Deaf learned about this potential merger between the ISLRTC and the NIHH, the organizing began: they spread the word to deaf communities all over India. If this merger goes through on April 27th, there could be 10000 people from all over India coming to protest in Delhi.**

**I'm Sarika Mehta and this is the story of a new Indian Independence.**

SARIKA

**Madan Vasishta serves as the chief officer of the ISLRTC. He is a retired faculty member of Gallaudet University in Washington DC and a leader in the Deaf South Asian American community. He's been involved with the center since its beginnings, including the planning commission with the Indian National Association of the Deaf. With Neerja Vasishta interpreting, met on skype, where he explained some of the historical context of the movement. The Indian government's National Institute for the Hearing Handicapped, or NIHH, is set to take control of the center, against the needs of the Indian Deaf Community.**

MADAN

**So if the center is put under NIHH, the same will happen. Perhaps use the money for cochlear implants or hearing aids - it could be for any kind of reason. So we really need deaf people involved, they need to have important positions - directors, assistant directors. We need deaf people to start those sign language classes, to start the interpreting program, research on deaf**

education. So many programs. What about the Ramayana, Mahabharata - there are so many things that could be in Indian Sign Language for deaf children. And that should all be controlled by deaf people. You have to remember Indian Sign Language is the mother tongue of deaf people in India.

So after a year, instead of it being established as an autonomous organization, they very quietly are trying to put into the NIHH - the National Institute for the Hearing Handicapped. Which is why deaf people are really fighting to establish the center as an autonomous org. Period.

SARIKA

**Back in March, while I was in Mumbai, India, I spoke with Sunil Sahasrabudhe, a leader on the ground and a private contractor with the NIHH. Sunil is deaf, born to a Deaf family and first language is Indian Sign Language, and he's fluent in several other languages. There was no available interpreter when we met, so through switching between American Sign Language, Indian Sign Language and spoken English, he agreed to chat with me and use his voice on the mic. For this story, Vainateya Deshpande provided voiceover.**

**He and the Indian National Association of the Deaf met with minister leaders in Delhi back in March, to lobby against the merger of the NIHH and the ISLRTC. The NIHH is regulated under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. As Sunil explains, that particular minister was unaware that although the NIHH specializes in the needs of deaf Indians, the agency focuses on rehabilitative efforts such as speech therapy and hearing aids. The deaf community doesn't want this merger - they want autonomy.**

SUNIL

Because the Social Justice & Empowerment minister isn't aware of the reality, the model of the NIHH, etc. He thinks the NIHH has been doing a great job. But it's a rehabilitative institute that is not helping us. He didn't know the cultural perspective of deafness. We are demanding autonomy, not the merger. We already declared that if the government doesn't listen, if it falls on deaf ears, we will protest. All over India, deaf people will gather in Delhi. This is the ultimate!

SARIKA

**I also spoke with Sunil's wife, Shweta Sahasrabudhe. She explained some of her challenges in the workplace, as a person who is deaf and why she is against the merger of the NIHH and the ISLRTC. Shweta grew up in a Hearing family who did not learn to sign. She acquired several languages along the way, along with Indian Sign Language at the age of 22. She now considers Indian Sign Language her mother-tongue.**

**Again, without an interpreter, Shweta was also willing to use her voice on the mic. For the purposes of this story, Shruti Deshpande provided voiceover.**

**She explains that she has to spend a lot of her energy lip-reading, requesting coworkers to look at her when they speak, that she have good lighting and she still ends up getting maybe 50% access to communication.**

SHWETA

I have to tell people at work, please face me, stand in the light. But sometimes they don't pay attention. Sometimes they'll purposely talk behind my back. And there's no interpreter. I want an interpreter but there's no interpreter. I wish they would understand my role, have empathy. Sometimes there is a communication gap, but I just have to adjust.

SARIKA

**Shweta is not alone in her struggles in the workplace. Sunil explained a time in which a local coffeeshop chain, Cafe Coffee Day, made a point to hire at least one deaf employee at every shop. While the company appeared to have good intentions, most of those employees ended up quitting because they could not communicate effectively in the workplace. Sunil explains the importance of respect for language and communication.**

SUNIL

They should've hired at least 2 Deaf people so that the staff could communicate with each other. And they should train other staff, teach them sign language. But the coffeeshop didn't understand. So many deaf people were depressed so they quit. The company thinks deaf people are not motivated - that they work for a short while and then leave their job. But deaf people wanted another deaf staff, but they never listened. I tried to counsel many companies so that they would communicate this, but nobody is listening!

SARIKA

**As Sunil said, nobody is listening! This is why Deaf Indians feel so passionately about the ISLRTC Autonomy Now movement. While the basis of the center is to promote Deaf Culture, Indian Sign Language and bilingualism in professionals who work with deaf children, the intent is much greater: to influence policy for the lives of Deaf Indians.**

**India is a multilingual country with more than 20 official languages recognized by the Indian government. This list of official languages does not include Indian Sign Language. This issue is further complicated by the fact that Deaf Indians are considered people with disabilities and therefore often facing discrimination in the workplace.**

**Additionally, the Indian law, the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) act of 1995 protects the rights, participation and equality of people with disabilities . The problem is that this law has no provision for interpreters.**

**Madan Vasishtha explains further:**

MADAN

Deaf people in India are a very oppressed group. For example the NIHH is the audist body of the Indian government to serve deaf people. However it has less than 1% of deaf people working there! And they have low class jobs, they're peons or something like that. And so almost all of the funding is spent on audiological training or speech or cochlear implants or things like that. Less than 1% on sign language. Deaf people are oppressed and they need independence from their oppressors. And unfortunately, those oppressors are not from other countries. They're right here in India and they're hearing people.

SARIKA

**This oppression is felt far and wide, as is the desire for Independence. Shweta and Sunil used their speech with me for this interview, but they both vehemently expressed that they prefer to communicate in their native language, Indian Sign Language. They have a lifetime of experience in lip-reading across Marathi, Hindi and English, but obviously prefer communicating in Indian Sign Language. Another issue that is strongly addressed at the Center.**

**Due to the lack of interpreter, they accommodated to me for the purpose of this story, but this - this comfort in using speech with hearing people - this does not represent all deaf Indians.**

**Depending on lip-reading is not fair to Deaf Indians, especially in group conversations where everyone interrupts each other. Shweta's greatest frustration is that she cannot participate in these groups.**

SHWETA

When it's a group discussion, I get lost. Because I don't know when they switch topics. I have to watch their lips and catch on when they switch the topic and when a new person is speaking. I have the same opinions on the same topic, but I can't express myself. I'm not stupid, I have my own opinions! I want to share too but no one gives me a chance. We are learning their language but nobody is learning our language.

SUNIL

I strongly believe that the more I read, the better I get in languages. That's why we've been good readers. But not many deaf people are like that. It's not their fault. They are not taught to use sign language from the beginning. So they lose interest and language acquisition. If they learned sign language from childhood, it would be a pleasure to learn to read and write. But that's how it is here in India - oralism. Which doesn't benefit anyone.

Narrate:

**Sunil emphasizes the importance of the ISLRTC establishment and its autonomy. The NIH, the government agency specializing in the needs of deaf and hard of hearing Indians, operates under the medical perspective which is to promote speech therapy, and oralism. If the ISLRTC remained autonomously run by deaf Indians who themselves promote the use of Indian Sign Language and bilingualism, they could implement better programs in deaf schools. Sunil considers an autonomously run Indian Sign Language Research and Training Center - a revolution for Deaf India.**

SUNIL

Teachers have to be bilingual, good at sign language and teaching literacy. I would say that deaf people must try to listen and speak, but that's a skill to develop. They have to grow up bilingual for success. That is why I'm here in the field to fight, to remove differences, and bring the revolution. I'm not alone - we'll fight together! So ISLRTC could be a good opportunity to bring the revolution!

SARIKA

**Shweta reiterates her struggles in the workplace: She had been sent for a 4-day training with no interpreter present. In fact, her boss was given a form to request services, but he never filled it out. The 1995 Persons With Disabilities act did not include a provision for interpreters. Shweta's experiences echo the frustrations of many Deaf Indians.**

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

**Shweta believes the ISLRTC could enforce policies such as interpreter services. Sunil believes it could work towards changing 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

**The desire for autonomy, this movement, the Indian Sign Language Research and Training Center - all of this is to show that Deaf Can. If the merger goes through, Deaf people from all over India will come to the capital city of Delhi and protest. The decision will be announced on April 27th.**

**Madan explains the community organizing efforts through technology and the historic nature of this movement.**

MADAN

For hearing people, it’s very important because they need to understand what is deafness, what is SL, who is managing it? And also to understand that deaf people are capable of managing and running their own organization. In India, “deaf-and-dumb” is one word. But they need to learn that deaf people are capable. And that they can do those things. This way they can see.

So we’re using whatsapp groups to teach each other and making some ISL videos to disseminate to show what this is all about. In the deaf community, there’s about 10 million people but they’re all spread out. It’s hard to know who knows what. So it is a big problem. This is the first time that deaf people are coming under one flag and trying to do something big.

We decided to give an ultimatum, we gave an ultimatum to the Indian government: That we cannot accept this injustice! And we will go out on the streets on April 27th, all over India, in small towns and big cities - and big groups will come to New Delhi. Our goal is to get 10,000 Deaf people out marching in the streets.

SARIKA

**This is the new Indian Independence, Deaf people gaining autonomy from a long history of oppression in a hearing world. According to Madan Vasishta, this kind of movement in India could impact Deaf communities in other South Asian nations:**

MADAN

A comparison with deaf people in India and in the US: It's the 21st century and in India, Deaf people are still slaves! They need to have rights. They need to have access to programs. And and they need to have a voice in the services that are provided to them. They should be involved.

This is the UNCRPD: it clearly says disabled people must be involved in all decision-making that affects them! And the PWD, which is an Indian law, also supports that. So in other words, the Indian government is breaking both international law and Indian law by ignoring deaf people's voice.

It could have a huge impact! Other countries don't have organizations managed by deaf people. And once India takes the lead in this direction, I'm sure this will impact other countries. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and other countries. People are going to want the kind of voice. And so these happenings in India will make a huge impact. At Gallaudet, the *Deaf President Now* movement really impacted what happened in America and in the world. This is very important as the 1947 freedom from the British.

SHWETA:

The ISLRTC will bring accessibility, inclusion in society and freedom for the deaf. Deaf should not be dumb or lost. Deaf should be...confident.

SUNIL

There is a famous quote by a 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.