

The Regressive Attitude of the Government of India

Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre being stifled

By Madan Vasishta

At a time when deaf people around the world are celebrating attainment of new rights, the Indian government is regressing and denying the right of Deaf people to have a hand in conducting research on Indian Sign Language (ISL) and training of interpreters.

About 85 deaf leaders from all over India gathered for a two-day meeting in New Delhi on March 15, 2015 in New Delhi. These leaders were from all walks of life—NGO officials, businessmen, teachers, government workers and professionals. They came by trains, planes and buses. They came from as near as Delhi and as far as Trivandrum near Sri Lanka. Some had spent three days in a train and some had been in a bus for 24 hours. They paid for their own way whether they could afford it or not. It was a pilgrimage for them, it was a duty and it was something they believed in and wanted to support.

They were here to request the government to make Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre (ISLRTC) an autonomous organization. There is a long story behind this depressing situation.

The National Association of the Deaf had fought for establishing ISLRTC for several years. Their efforts bore fruit and the decision to establish the ISLRTC was consequent to the advocacy done on this issue and the outcome of the 11th Five Year Plan. The then Finance Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, now President of India, had made an announcement to this effect in his speech while presenting the 2010-11 Union Budget.

Contrary to the expectation of the ISLRTC being established an autonomous institute in 2011, the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment (MSJE) without involving the NAD or even informing it, signed a MoU with the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and the ISLRTC was handed over to it. A sum of Rs. 44 crore (about \$7 million) was sanctioned by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment in 2011 for the establishment of this institute - 24 crore towards constructing a building and the balance towards operational costs for five years. The IGNOU had promised to provide five acres on its campus for this purpose and also providing the requisite infrastructure and support.

However, IGNOU reneged on its promises and after two wasted years, MSJE decided to get ISLRTC back from IGNOU. Joint Secretary of MSJE had assured the NAD deputation in July 2013 that ISLRTC would be established within a couple of month as an autonomous body. However, after almost two-years of inaction, the MSJE decided to place it under National Institute of Hearing Handicapped (NIHH) despite continuous petitions by deaf organizations including the National Association of the Deaf and All India Federation of the Deaf.

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has decided to turn a deaf ear to the deaf people's pleas and decided to place ISLRTC under National Institute of Hearing Handicapped (NIHH) in New Delhi. NIHH and ISLRTC have totally different focus. NIHH

believes in only the medical point of view on deafness and focuses on providing hearing aids and speech therapy. It does have an ISL Cell, which provides nominal training to public in using ISL and rudimentary interpreting. However, the goals of ISLRTC include recognition of Deaf people as a linguistic minority with a distinct culture, conducting linguistic research in ISL, interpreter training, bilingual education of deaf children (using ISL as the base language), developing curricula and instructional material, and training of deaf individuals to become teachers. The NIHH administration neither believes in the capabilities of this powerful visual language that can and does revolutionize deaf education nor does it have the qualified human resources to effectively implement ISLRTC goals.

The UNCRPD, which the Indian Government has ratified, requires that disabled people be involved in decisions that effects their education and lives. The Indian RPWD also supports this right. The government, in its hurry and just to find a simplistic solution to a very complex issue is washing its hands off by placing ISLRTC under NIHH.

The meeting of the deaf leaders was held all day southern New Delhi. The leaders addressed the meeting on a variety of topics: history of ISLRTC, rationale for establishing it as an autonomous body, reasons for NIHH's unsuitability to manage ISLRTC and strategies for meeting ministers and plans if support from the minister does not result in the desired outcome.

On 16th march, deputations of four to eight deaf leaders along with interpreters met with the five cabinet ministers. All of these meeting were very positive. The ministers received our written information and listened to our grievance. They all promised that they would make sure that our requests are honored. We are hoping that they will keep their words. However, it has been more than two weeks and no action has been taken.

On 16th March 2015 we have done the press conference in the evening and got article on news paper Including attached with news papers.

Unless some action is taken, the NAD is committed to hold a national demonstration against this injustice on April 27, 2015. The NAD is going to request other disability organizations to support its demand. Having a large demonstration with all disability groups.

Deaf communities around the world are appalled at this regressive attitude of the Indian government. The GOI has ratified the UNCRPD, which clearly details the right of deaf people to sign language and involvement of disability groups in all decisions related to them.

Let us hope the government learns the importance of the autonomy of ISLRTC and reverses its decision soon and before the deaf people from all over India take to streets.