**Still no sign of the language of equity and inclusion**

The general election 2024 is almost nearing its end. Yet, when the Election Commission of India (ECI) made the announcement for the election in March, the long video televised and propagated on social media, stood out for one detail — the absence of sign language interpreters. This is a small, but significant, example of the ways in which everyday life in India excludes Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) citizens.

India’s push for equity in education, health care, and rights cannot succeed without dismantling ableist barriers that exclude DHH people.

Consider the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Deafness, to prevent and treat hearing impairment and provide medical rehabilitation. While it is well-structured, it does not focus on the quality of life. It discusses theoretical aspects of screening procedures and hearing aid prescription, but does not mention the Indian Sign Language (ISL) which is an integral form of deaf communication. The Social Justice Ministry set up the ISL Research and Training Centre in 2015 officially, but ISL is still not recognised as an official language. Despite the National Education Policy 2020 recommending the standardised teaching of ISL across schools, its use in education systems remains sparse even in schools for the deaf.

Sign language versus oralism

The Indian education system still focuses on “oralism”, where deaf people are taught to use their voices and lip read, instead of using their hands to communicate.

Most educators in deaf schools are not trained in ISL. Instead of creating better access and remediating marginalisation, the current deaf education system focuses on “rehabilitation”, asking the deaf to adjust to their surroundings instead of removing social barriers. An exclusive focus on oralism has been criticised for creating an isolatory social structure for deaf people in an inherently ableist world. On the other hand, integrating sign language has been found to help deaf children in cognitive development and prevent linguistic deprivation; over 70 countries recognise national sign languages legally, which makes education and critical information truly accessible to deaf citizens.

Our ableism is reflected in how invisible the deaf are in India.

A headcount in India

In the 2011 Census, there were five million hearing-impaired people in India. The National Association of the Deaf counts 18 million. The World Health Organization estimates nearly 63 million Indians to have significant hearing impairment. However, they rarely find inclusion in our lives. Only 5% of deaf children find themselves in school, and it often takes them much longer to graduate, thanks to an oralist course structure.

Despite government initiatives to employ the deaf, they often struggle to secure employment. Protests erupted in 2020 due to recruitment favouring those with less than 40% hearing impairment. Multiple petitions to recognise ISL have been stonewalled, citing the adequacy of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, (RPDA) 2016 for preserving and advancing the language. This failure, despite several protests, is a covert yet overt act of marginalisation.

What does everyday life look like for deaf people? Public transport announcements, TV shows, directions within public structures, and even calling helplines are made insurmountable tasks due to a lack of accessibility. Minuscule everyday things taken for granted by others become wars won after years of litigation and advocacy. Although Doordarshan pioneered a weekly news segment in ISL in 1987, its precedent has not been taken up by private news channels. While films, Indian Premier League 2024 cricket matches and OTT shows have come up with accessible options, we have a lot of slack to pick up.

Opportunities for the deaf community remain limited to housekeeping jobs, wait staff, and data entry operators. The private sector has programmes in place for accessibility and inclusion with captioning and interpreter services. However, the government sector has made little progress. Several state- and national-level protests have been mounted by the deaf over the years. Their demands for accessible education and better employment have been met with lathi charge or lackadaisical promises. Despite the RPDA, policy changes mean little in the face of such lethargy in implementation.

The deaf community faces challenges and additional discrimination with access to health care as most hospitals in India lack interpreters. Complications increase for mental health-care access to the deaf community due to a lack of training in language interpretation. The Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 promises mental health care for all, but it is not effectively implemented, with only 250 certified sign language interpreters and no clear data on ISL-trained mental health professionals.

What needs to be done

The present situation demands diverging from ableism towards accessibility. ISL should be recognised as a language officially, and its use must be naturalised in schools and colleges, for hearing and DHH students alike. It should be taught by DHH individuals, further buffeting their employment opportunities. The hearing population should be able to practise ISL in everyday situations to achieve fluency in the language.

Health-care systems must be updated so that the deaf population has easy and accessible communication at all levels. DHH patients benefit from receiving care from language-concordant physicians. However, the regulatory medical, dental, and nursing commissions impose significant barriers on DHH individuals aspiring to health-care professions. Inclusivity will not only make the health-care workforce more diverse and inclusive but will also mainstream ISL interpreters.

Deaf programming should be par for the course across media channels. Channels with English language programming often have accessible subtitles. However, Hindi and other regional languages do not have ISL interpretation or subtitles. Government event announcements should have live ISL interpreters, a common feature in several countries. One can hope that with timely interventions in the right direction, we may witness real-time ISL interpretations in the next election mandated by the ECI.

Finally, more issues exist than are highlighted in this article. The authorities concerned should pay heed to the DHH community and its needs.