

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 28
ISL Workshop Day 1 – Part 2
Introduction to Deaf Ways of Living as a Linguistic Minority

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Thank you. So, we got the ISLRTC being set up which is the Indian Sign Language Research and Training Center which is working on a dictionary of Indian sign language which is also available online through YouTube videos. So, there is a lot of work happening there. And the recent RPWD which is the Rights of the People with Disabilities also mentions that sign language is to be used as an accessibility for deaf people either in education, mostly in education. But even in other areas like in jobs or accessibility to general information. So, there is a widespread recognition even in the latest NEP which is the National Education Policy which in 2020 was announced also mentions use of sign language in schools and teachers having to learn this to be able to educate.

Like Rahul was mentioning there are about 700 or 800 deaf schools where only deaf children go and study there. Whereas, sign language is not the medium of education that is used in these schools. So, the language earlier on was not propagated, was not encouraged, but now it is slowly seeing acceptance and relevance in increasing education awareness for the deaf community. Recently, the world hearing report was launched by the WHO which is a World Health Organization, which focuses as we all knew on the health of people worldwide.

And March 3 is recognized as the World Hearing Day by the World Health Organization, sends out various information on care of the ear and the hearing. But for the first time, this year they have included sign language to be an important part of rehabilitation of deaf people and even with people who may have hearing loss at a later stage. So, these are all very good signs for the deaf community who have been really struggling to get recognition of their language which is their human right to have their own language in their own accessible way. But these are really positive and good signs. And having workshops like this is definitely another sign where many people outside of the deaf

community are interested to know this different world, you get to know about this world which is so beautiful, which is so expressive with the language that they are using. So great. Thank you very much. And at the end, I would also like to say that sign language is not only restricted to the deaf community, but there is you will see another set of people who use sign language but in different zones. Like you have additional disabilities along with deafness. So, we have a group of people who have deaf blindness, who also use sign language which is very important for them for communication. And the language that they use is tactile sign language.

Similarly, we have other disabilities, along with that deafness is also prevalent. It could be autism with deafness, it could be cerebral palsy with deafness. So having all these prevalences only makes the case stronger that sign language is a language that is necessary, not just a want, but it is a necessity for deaf people to be able to access communication, education, jobs and any other information that they want to.

So, I just want to ask either Mr. Gopalakrishnan or Rahul to tell us. I know that both of you are from different, I should not say generation, but both of you are from different times, Mr. Gopalakrishnan you have seen a different time where technology was not there for you to access as today Rahul probably has seen, right? So, can you just tell us your experiences with being able to communicate even though sign language was your language how difficult was it back then? And how easy or difficult it is today?

Gopalakrishnan Venkatraman: Okay, long time back when I was working with deaf associations, we use a lot of handwritten letters and the postal devices and the postal system. And later on, after 20 years, at that point of time we did not use much of SMS. For sending money, we have to use the money order system. So, it was all getting delayed like anything, everything. For example, sports events, any kind of meetings, we have to write to them two months in advance for the postal system to reach them. Right now, the whole generation is changed completely. So, for any kind of conference, we just inform them three months in advance. So, it was not like this long time back. For example, if I want to communicate with my father or my mother or my friends, I need to write a letter and then it reaches them after a week.

For example, if I want to visit a friend, to meet him and speak to him, I have no idea whether he is there at home. I need to go all the way to his house and then I find his house locked and then so many issues like that. But right now, it is very easy. I just ask

them, message them whether they are there or not. And even for sending money, we have this new app called Google Pay, so there is no need to send a check or money order and wait for a week or two weeks and then get the money credited in the account. So, there is lot of difference. We had a lot of issues long time back and technology everything is now very smooth. Thank you.

Rahul Jain: So, a lot of youth right now are more habituated with technology because right now technology is very visual. So, we can easily access the different apps for example, Facebook and Instagram and Twitter. So, all these kinds of social media we are able to use. So, a lot of deaf people post lot of video messages and for the youth it is very easy for us to get lot of information and there is a lot of entertainment. Everything is ready. I know who the person is on video. It is very easy to communicate with people. For example, we can have a live chat and other people can watch us having a live chat. For example, in Instagram and Facebook, initially Facebook was used much, but not much now. So, a social media for example Instagram, deaf people are really using that a lot. At that point of time, communication was very difficult. People used to be very lonely. So, in older ages like when people have to communicate, they have to meet at a place and then they talk to each other. But nowadays, we do not have to get out, we can just sit at home and then communicate with each other and interact.

So that is how technology is being used right now. The elderly people right now are not much used to Instagram. So, what they do is probably they use WhatsApp and do a video call. And they are also not much used to Facebook, probably some of them just use Facebook to just see the pictures and all that. So many of them are not very used to technology and the latest apps but the youth are very into it.

Gopalakrishnan Venkatraman: For booking train tickets previously I had to fill up a form, stand in the queue, and then give it at the counter and get the tickets booked. Sometimes they say the tickets are not available. But now with the latest technology, we are able to find out this availability, seat and berth availability and easily book tickets, even for flight tickets. Previously, we have no idea if you want to book a flight ticket, we have no idea what is the price, we have to go to the airport office to book tickets, but nowadays it is very easy. Previously we have a lot of issues, but nowadays things have become very easy for us. Thank you.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Thank you for that information, Mr. Gopalakrishnan and Rahul. Yes, technology has definitely changed for every one of us. But especially for deaf people I think it has given a lot more connection within your community, within people outside as well where sign language has gained popularity, has become a medium of communication for people to also recognize that sign language is an easier and complete way of communication. Because there are people who are deaf, who also do not use sign language because of the choices that their parents would have taken for them at a very young age. But later on, when they grow up which is after their adolescence, they do see a different world. They come in contact with the deaf community and they see that there is a visual language which is easier to communicate, to express oneself, everything that is possible to learn because having the difficulty of hearing does pose a lot of challenges to access the spoken language. So, thank you very much to both the presenters today. So, Dr. Hem if there are any questions that anybody would like to ask, I think they can go ahead and ask. It is the end of today's session.

Hemachandran Karah: Great Nita thank you. Nita Gopalakrishnan and Rahul, thank you so much. I think the listeners can send chat messages to ask questions and those who are not able to send messages that way can also use mic, I guess. But can I ask a couple of questions to begin with Nita? One is that listening to all three of you, I am amazed about the beauty of using hands and face. I wish I could touch Rahul's and Gopalakrishnan's hands and feel how they sign. You know, more fundamentally I think the lecture method that we adopt in schools and colleges have in some way destroyed our capacity to use facial expressions and gestures more with more freedom and facility.

What I am going to ask is, what do you think are the greatest advantages of now in the 21st century being bilingual, meaning as a sign language user and oral language user? If I can toss both the languages with the facility will there be a special advantage? I mean I think that is what we should advocate for, for a fuller expression, a facility to cross the medium and the languages and the cultures if you like, do I make sense Nita?

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yes, yes. Absolutely. Thank you so much for that question. I think that adds to our presentation today as well, your question is so pertinent. We are talking about sign language. However, as we know and as I think the presenters have also said that this is a visual language where it is not written, it does not have a script, it cannot be

written. And for reading and writing, we have to use a written language or a spoken language. There are many languages as we know also which do not have scripts like we have got Lombardi, for many other languages which we know though they are all spoken but they do not have a script of their own.

So similarly, sign language is that way and bilingualism is what we are very strongly advocating because we need to have communication and a medium of learning the way it is today. It is all you have got textbooks, you have got written material, a lot of it around, so which all needs to be accessed as well. So bilingual way is the way forward where sign language becomes a medium of instruction. Whereas, there is another language which is learned through which they can read and write. This is the deaf people, but otherwise also if we want to promote sign language as another language like we have other languages in school. This is a thought that I am going really way forward. So, there are some countries like UK, the Britain they have already started advocating it where any school, any child, whether they are deaf or not should have an opportunity to choose sign language as a language that they want to learn along with any other languages that they are learning. So, I hope we will get there to here.

But definitely to answer your question and I do not know if I am answering it to the point, bilingualism is definitely the way forward and having expertise in two or more languages is definitely helpful.

Hemachandran Karah: Thank you, Nita. That is very useful. I also want to ask about, sorry I am taking everybody's space, but I thought if we could also mention a little bit about hearing aids and the medical model. Because people would say, well if I can restore your hearing capacity why all this fuss? So that is the approach of the medic, I mean a rigid medic, would like to talk about it?

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Sure, I will just quickly check with either Mr. Gopalakrishnan or Rahul if they want to take that question and I can add at the end.

Gopalakrishnan Venkatraman: So about hearing aids and those kinds of systems that is all fine. But other things like parents love and care are involved. If he is able to use hearing aids at all the time 24 hours a day and if the parents are able to take care of him, then it is fine. But for other deaf people it is really difficult to have hearing aids all the

time, keep hearing aid and listening to sounds all the time and parents and the care that they give and not like, there are lot of other issues. So, there are some children, you know there are some schools for example, Balavidyalaya in Chennai, so they are focus much on speech. So, for other children who do not get much attention from the parents, what do they do? You take my example, initially I used to use hearing aids a lot. But it was very uncomfortable with me. I could lip read very little and even my speech is not very clear. So, sign language is much comfortable for me. So, it depends on the person or the child.

Rahul Jain: So, for information, hearing people who can hear completely, so for normal people and for those who are using hearing aids to have undergo lot of therapy and training for them to speak and hear just like a hearing person it is very difficult. It is very difficult if one speaks really fast and you have to keep looking at the person's face directly.

But if there is a crowd of people and lot of people speak at the same time, so it is very difficult for us to identify who is speaking what, it is very confusing. And thirdly, some deaf children can read what is there on the textbook or what is printed, but the concept and everything is very difficult for them to understand. So, the deaf child using speech only it is not easy for them to be just like the hearing person. But for those deaf children who are using sign language, the concepts and everything is very well developed. So mentally, they are much equal to hearing people. So, I would like to just let you know about this.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yes, absolutely. So, I will just add there. So, deafness is a spectrum if you can say because there are varying degrees of hearing loss. And if we have a technology like a hearing aid or cochlear implant, it can help to a certain extent.

You cannot restore the hearing completely as against the popular myth that you put a hearing aid and the person becomes hearing or you have a cochlear implant and the person becomes 100% hearing. So, that is actually a misconception. So, the hearing aid is able to help the residual hearing whatever is there for the person. However, there are a lot of different sounds and as we know sounds are divided in two. Sounds can be measured either on the intensity or the frequency. Depending on a person's hearing loss, some of the sounds if you can amplify the sound level that means the volume and you

have ways to amplify or ways to even incorporate the frequency level. But it is not possible and it is not successful in every person because it depends on the hearing loss.

Now, like Mr. Gopalakrishnan or Rahul both of them are profoundly deaf which is the highest in the spectrum of deafness, the lowest will be a mild hearing loss, which is somewhere between 25 to 40% of hearing loss whereas the rest 60% is still functional. And then you have got moderate hearing loss, then you have got a severe hearing loss category and you have got a profound hearing loss category.

So for profound hearing loss people, it is really difficult because very miniscule amount of residual hearing which even with the help of these technologies cannot, you cannot hear speech, regular speech is not comprehensible. Well, but there could be cases where people would come up and say with speech therapy, with the technology use, we are still able to cope and how was it possible? That is because of something called lip reading which deaf people can do; it is a can do and I am being very specific because not all of them can do, it is a skill and has to be learned. And like Mr. Gopalakrishnan started off his presentation by saying how difficult it was for him to understand some of the similar looking words on the lips like slow, blow something like that. It looks very similar and it could become very confusing because you have to constantly try to match to the context and it becomes very strenuous as well.

So, there are definitely aids which can improve a person's hearing capability to a certain extent, but it is not suitable for all. So like we have choices for any technology or any age that any of us would like to take, this is a choice that should be there for the parents or the deaf person themselves to choose.

Hemachandran Karah: Do we have further questions Nita?

Nita Gopalakrishnan: There are a lot of questions actually on the chat if I can start taking them. So, we have a question from Karthika. She asks, is Indian sign language the same everywhere in India? Can a deaf person from Tamil Nadu interact with a person of Uttar Pradesh?

Gopalakrishnan Venkatraman: Yes, I already saw that question. So, Karthika has asked this question. So Indian sign language is the same, it is not completely the same, 80% of the world's signs use are the same, the 20% might be different. For example, the days of

the week, families, the signs of families and relations, well might be a little different but the basic way of signing is the same. So for example, for mother you have three different signs, for father you have different signs, brother or sign for sister, for example we have this sign for sister, sign for aunt and uncle. And even some of the signs for the numerals the numbers are different. For example, in the north we sign 9 like that, in the south we sign the number 9 the different way. But the way a sign language is used, facial expressions and everything it is the same throughout. Thank you for your question.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Great. Yes. Thank you for that question, Karthika. Yes, anyone from Tamil Nadu can definitely talk to another person in Utter Pradesh, unlike Tamil and Hindi which are so very different and they find it difficult to communicate. But like Mr. Gopalakrishnan said 80% is the same whereas just 20% variance is there based on the local culture, local traditions that are there.

Hemachandran Karah: So perhaps in that sense, it is the only pan Indian language.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: You could say that.

Amaresh Gopalakrishnan: So, Nita says that Dr. Hema said that spoken languages are different, but ISL can be considered as pan Indian language. So, Gopalakrishnan sir says that it is kind of a universal language which we can use.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: So, I have another question from Sonal Sinha and her question is, they say deaf adolescents come across established sign language at a later stage, so are they able to learn it properly or do they face problem and are not fluent? Is there any acquisition and learning process in these as well?

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Does anybody, either Gopalakrishnan or Rahul they want to answer?

Rahul Jain: Read the question again.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: So deaf adolescents come across sign language at a later age, are they able to learn it properly or do they face any problems to become fluent in signs? And is there a process for acquisition in learning?

Rahul Jain: So, I have a friend of mine who is a deaf person who is kind of hard of hearing. So, he was mainstreamed in school, he does not sign. After his 12th, so for him he uses hearing aids. Now when he meets other deaf people who use sign language, for him where he meets a deaf person who use sign language for the first time, it was not much difficult. It is easy for him to learn sign language. I feel this is the deaf

community, for example the deaf associations and the clubs. If he visits them, interacts with lot of deaf people regularly it is very easy for him to learn sign language easily and you can apply the same skill as person. So probably his written or spoken languages might be better. So, for a deaf person who uses sign language since childhood and is in school for the deaf, he does not have good education, he might have very good sign language skills but probably the spoken language skills are not good. For the first case, his spoken language and sign language are good, but maybe his concepts, the capacity is not that much as deaf person who use a sign language since childhood. So, there are slight differences in that. I hope it is clear.

Hemachandran Karah: Perhaps a person who is learning from childhood, sign language becomes that person's second nature. Maybe for an adult, it takes a while, maybe, it is like me learning a new language now. It would not become my second nature out of my system. I am just thinking aloud, I may be wrong.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yeah, it is possible for them to learn it a little slower maybe. But we have seen cases where they pick it up faster than any other spoken language because it is so visual. It is something that they come across in a community setting. And because they are part of that community and they keep going there more often and associate with them, they pick up the language much faster than we would learning a different language. Okay. So, I have more questions here. Mehak Oberoi, so what are the difficulties faced career wise as a deaf person? And is there any discrimination in the hiring process?

Gopalakrishnan Venkatraman: Previously, during the 1980s and 1981 we celebrated the world disability year, the year was celebrated as the world disability year. By that point of time the volunteer federation of the deaf we had a lot of deaf of members who were not very educated, probably did not even complete the eighth standard. So, before that particular year we had a lot of people who could work for low level jobs or something like a technician or electrician or a plumber or something like that. So since then, since 1981, deaf people were able to find a lot of employment, low level employment. But after the 1995 act reviewed Persons with Disability Act, so we had some reservations for disabled people and things like that.

So after that, things became a little difficult. Deaf people had to have certificates to get jobs. So, when we had the new law which had come up after that, we had a lot of issues

finding employment, but before the 1995 Act deaf people were able to find jobs pretty easily, so that is the difference.

Rahul Jain: In terms of employment, so you had asked if they are suffering from discrimination happening when people are selected for jobs. So, we have certain cases, but we do not have proper data yet. So, we are trying to get the proper data. For example, if that person wants to go for the government or private job, whether they are able to communicate at the workplace and we are trying to get the data or cases where they have applied for job, but they have not been selected probably because the interview process was not convenient for them.

And if there are cases where some deaf people who use hearing aids and are able to communicate using speech are selected. So according to the law 1% of jobs must be reserved for hearing impaired people. So, we are trying to advocate that half of that must be given to profound and half of that to hard of hearing. So, we are still working towards that we do not have the proper data yet to work on. So, just analyzing that.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Thank you Rahul. We have more questions. So, we have Amal Jude Ashwin asking why does sign language have different vocabularies for words across the world? But fingerspelling is only based on English script, does not it contradict with the mother tongue of the signer?

Hemachandran Karah: I did not understand that question Nita.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Okay. So, from what I understand so sign language has various components. So, one of it is fingerspelling to spell out probably a name or a place. So proper nouns are spelled out using fingerspelling. So, the fingerspelling is mostly in English. So, you have got A, B, C, D all on the fingers it has been spelled. So, the question pertains to having different vocabularies for words across the world because sign languages are different across the world just like how we have different languages, spoken languages.

But the question is why do we follow English alphabet fingerspelling? And why not any other language? Then how does it help with the mother tongue concept? So that is the question and I hope I got the question right.

Rahul Jain: So, you know like globally we have different kinds of sign languages and they have their own vocabulary that has emerged naturally in those places. But we do use new convention, like for example if there isn't a sign for a particular word and then we

use the finger spelling. So probably there are lot of sign languages which have been used, their vocabulary is different. So, finger spelling used only when you have or you come across any word for which you do not know the sign language. So right now, there is a new system which is being developed like Braille, you can actually write the sign language down. For example, the sign for COVID is this. So previously, we did not have the sign for COVID-19 virus. So later on, when the pandemic happened and when people could actually visualize how the virus is, so slowly the deaf community actually invented a new sign for COVID-19. So nowadays, locally the sign for COVID-19 is the same.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Okay. So, next question I have for you is following to the previous question, is there a universal form of sign language to aid communication not limited by geographical boundaries?

Rahul Jain: Yes, we have two sets of language that I use, one is Indian Sign Language and other one is International Sign. International sign is not a conventional language as such, but it is mostly visual gestural language, which is mostly used in conferences, big gatherings where people from different countries come together. So during that time, we use International sign. This is more visual language and the signs are much slower, we use a lot of expressions. So, it is very easy for us to comprehend what the sign is.

So, recently when I visit a lot of countries, I do not have any issues communicating with them because I use a lot of international sign, maybe when I visit a place, I spend a week with them and I can easily understand the signs. So right now, I am a member of the Board of World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section. So, we have different members from different countries, so we communicate using international signs so we do not have any issues to communicate with each other.

Mr. Gopalakrishnan Venkatraman: So, like I mentioned before in India, 80% of the signs are the same and 20% is different. So similarly, throughout the world we use a lot of gestures. So locally, for their particular country, they might have their own vocabulary. Even for fingerspelling, we use the two-handed fingerspelling in India, but in America they use the one-handed fingerspelling and certain other countries they have their own fingerspelling too. I think around 70 to 80% we are able to sign and understand each other very well. So just like Rahul mentioned, we can use international sign and we can easily communicate with others.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Wait, I am very aware of the time but we have some questions still lined up. What do you suggest we do?

Hemachandran Karah: See, we have another 4-5 days Nita, they can come back with the same questions or added. They might have changed their thoughts about these questions. Yes. Thank you so much Gopalakrishnan sir, Rahul and Nita. Yes. You want to have the final word just by way of conclusion today?

Gopalakrishnan Venkatraman: So, we have completed the session today. So, I hope to see all of you for another energetic session tomorrow.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Thank you very much. Thank you very much doctor for organizing this workshop and this first day.

Hemachandran Karah: Thank you so much for the three of you and a huge audience out there. Wish you all a great evening.