

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 27
ISL Workshop Day 1 – Part 1
Introduction to Deaf Ways of Living as a Linguistic Minority

Hemachandran Karah: Hello all, good evening all of you, a warm welcome. Well, we are doing this online. I wish it was all of you coming here to our campus IIT Madras. Well, we will do it next time. My sincere thanks to Nita Gopalakrishnan for making this possible. I just straightaway get into the theme today.

Well, broadly, when we think about language, we have a very narrow worldview. Meaning, something which we use for communicating with people and that too orally that is such a limited definition. Because humanity evolved with lots and lots of dynamic rhetorical devices and other modalities of expression through body, through facial expression, gestures, signs, dance and many more form of expression. And languages are diverse. Their modalities, registers, and expressions, they are very dynamic. Having said that, we now want to focus on Indian sign language. Broadly, sign languages you know deaf people have an important claim and something important to say about sign languages. Sign languages are a culture, they are a system and a linguistic heritage. It is also fundamental to deaf ways of living. So, an understanding of these notions will not only help us be more democratic and more inclusive in our classrooms. But also more sensitive and have a broader cosmopolitan vision in the friendships that we make, notions of inclusion that we develop and broadly an informed life. So, with this note, I want to hand it over to Nita.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Thank you. Thank you Hem. Actually, I call him Hem, but he is Dr. Hemachandran, very well-known professor in IIT Madras. I really thank you doctor for having (()) (03:25) today and bringing up this important topic of Indian sign language which holds all rights of a language in extreme way.

So today, I have two very well-known people in the deaf community who will be presenting. So, before I introduce them, I will just quickly introduce myself because you will be hearing me speak in between. So, I am Nita Gopalakrishnan and I am a cofounder of an organization, a company called Yunikee which creates content in Indian sign language to cater to the millions of deaf people in India to be able to access information

in sign language. And I am also a passionate educationist of deaf children and young people. And I am also a technical advisor with an international NGO for Deaf Child Worldwide. So, to introduce today's presenters, we have got Mr. Gopalakrishnan Venkataraman who is a pioneer in documenting the Indian sign language. He was the author of the first Indian sign language dictionary. And he is a veteran advocate of sign language and deaf literacy in India. He has been instrumental in bringing and unifying a common cause for the deaf community by bringing forward the challenges that are being faced. He started off by setting up the Madras Association of the Deaf, this is way back in the 70s and then he was also the first member from the deaf community to be invited for the Olympics. And with his various roles, he has been working with many deaf organizations and associations. And today he is serving as the general secretary of the All India Federation of the Deaf which is the apex body of all deaf associations in India. So, we welcome Mr. Gopalakrishnan today.

And the next presenter we have is a very young and dynamic growing deaf leader who is looked up for inspiration by millions of young deaf adults. He is the Indian representative of the World Federation of the Deaf Youth Forum and he has presented India's views and has maintained diplomatic relationships with his counterparts around the world. He is also a certified sign language teacher and the chief operating officer for Yunikee, which is a company that creates sign language content. And he is also the cofounder and a partner of Let us Sign which is another company which creates content in sign language. He is also a special advisor for the Speaking Hands Foundation, an NGO that works towards education of deaf children.

So, I welcome these two very prominent and very well established and experienced presenters for today's workshop. So, I will give the floor up to Mr. Gopalakrishnan. So, I am just asking Mr. Gopalakrishnan to start again.

Gopalakrishnan Venkataraman: So I thank Dr. Hem and IIT Chennai for inviting me to this webinar. My name is Gopalakrishnan and I am the general secretary of the All India Federation of the Deaf which is headquartered in Delhi. So 2 years back I won elections and since then I have been working here. I am very happy to be in this webinar too. So to talk about definite history and about sign language, I really did not know much about sign language because I was used to the oral method. I used to live and speak out with my family members. But later on, when I saw a lot of deaf people who were using sign language, I was not really sure whether the sign language is good or not.

So, when I went to America to attend the Deaf Olympics the 10th World Games of the Deaf, so a lot of countries, around 80 countries have participated in that particular event. So just before that event just before I flew to America, I was using the oral method. When I was in America, I saw that a lot of deaf people were signing. We had America, Japan, Africa, so many deaf people over there from different countries were all signing over there.

But the Indian contingent did not use sign language much. So after I came back to India, I started propagating sign language. For example, in oral method, deaf people cannot hear the voices or the speech, so you only have to look at the lips. For example, there are words like snow, show, slow so words like these the lip movements are the same. For the consonants, the sound of the consonants will be different. But it is very difficult for deaf people to capture the sound of the consonants. So, we are not very sure whether it is snow or slow or show. So, we have to just guess what the word is. But previously, sign language was not allowed to be used in schools, so we had to use the oral method. Later on, we had a person called Dr. Madan who had come to India and he has published a book on sign language. But even after that, we did not have any much development.

Later on, there was a system called the Indian sign system which was developed. But we could not accept that because it was not proper sign language. And later on, there was an organization called CBM that funded an Indian sign language dictionary project to develop a dictionary. So, I was working there and my son Amaresh was also working with me. So, after two years of work, we published the dictionary and also started the Diploma and Sign Language Interpreting course which was approved by Rehabilitation Council of India, which was started for the first time in India. And we had a lot of batches for the next 5 years, we had a lot of interpreters who are certified and even the dictionary was published and distributed. And later on, I joined as a sign language teacher then, the classes started around 2002. And slowly at the moment we have around 300 sign language interpreters and some more interpreters who are not certified.

And I am also happy to say that the Indian Sign Language Research and Training Center is established by the government, so they are also doing a lot of work on that. And after

this, it is about the Indian Sign Language Research Training Center. And now we also have a lot of organizations, civil society organizations and nongovernment organizations.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: So, I think we are having issues with Mr. Gopalakrishnan's video here and his internet connectivity. So, I will request Mr. Rahul to kindly present now.

Rahul Jain: Hi, everyone. Let me present myself to all the IIT students and you all are probably thinking about deaf person (()) (15:02) about sign language. So let me say something about it. So, for me my first language was sign language. The reason is because both my parents are deaf and I am also a deaf person. So, my first language was sign language. So, I used sign language growing up. And I did learn a little bit of oral method, but I could not understand, I would not be able to speak proper sentences except for a few words. The reason being there is a story of our Mahatma Gandhi about how he struggles and all that. So, I will be able to sign the whole story, but I would not be able to speak the whole story out because I would not be able to make these full sentences, the grammar of the spoken language is very difficult for me. So even though I learned a little bit of speech by the age of 12, I really could not understand much. So, I was very interested at why.

I did use hearing aids, but I was not very like enthusiastic about using all that. So, I told my parents that I am not interested in that. So, I moved on to the deaf community and used sign language and even in deaf associations and the deaf clubs. So, my parents used to take me to all these places and I used to see people signing and I did not know at that point of time if it was a language or not, but saw it as natural communication.

So here in the city, they have their own way of signing. So, at that point of time, I was not aware that this is a language or anything like that. So it is just a way of communicating, so I used it a lot. Once when I had been to Gujarat with my father, there was a program over there, so there was an event. So, there I saw that the sign that they used were completely different from what I was used to. So, when I had been to Gujarat, I did not understand this particular sign so that meant that it was sign for night. So, there and here we sign in a different way, but there in Gujarat they sign in a different way because that was a sign for dark. So, the signs were different and there they used to show this particular sign for morning like brushing the teeth. So, I just could not understand the local sign language at that time. But my father was able to easily communicate with

them because he grew up in Gujarat. So, he knows the sign language, he is pretty habituated with that. So, my family we lived in Dehradun. So, I was much aware of the local lexicon, but my father knew the vocabulary in both these places. So, at the time I was I was wondering whether the sign language used in India were different in different places or whether the same.

So later on, I joined the Indian sign language course at the National Institute Hearing Handicapped. So, we learned about the standardized Indian sign language that also I learned about the variations probably were about 20 to 25% differences, variations in the signs used in different places, for example in Kolkata, in Kerala, in Gujarat, in Delhi. So, in all these places, the grammar of the sign language is the same all throughout, but the vocabulary might be different. For example, colors, the sign for numbers, the sign for the weeks of the day, for the months. So, they might have different signs which has been involved in those places. They might not be the same, but around 70 to 75% of the signs were same and the way we sign are the same, just the vocabulary might be different. So, this I learned at that point of time. So, I was very interested, like to continue in this field.

So, I joined as a sign language instructor at the same place and I used sign language. So, at that point of time, the local varieties also we have to learn. So, probably we meet deaf people from different places for a week or for 15 days and then I learned variations from different place also, just like how in spoken languages like we have English and Hindi. So, it is not the exact translation and design in sign language because sign language has got its own grammar and it is naturally involved language. It has been used for a very long time and we do not have a script. So, it is all the signs are mostly iconic like home, trees, food. So, we can like use these and combine these signs to have our own grammar. So, we do not have the exact translation or exact grammar of the spoken language, so it is completely different.

So here, when I learned that it is completely different, the deaf people have their own language they have their own grammar, we also have own identity, our own culture, it is called deafhood, which is not very similar to non-deaf people. For example, the culture with regard to food and clothes are similar, yes. Religion, we also follow the same customs, but the language is completely different. And some of the behaviors are not very similar, even though we are a little bit similar, but we still have differences. Deaf

people have their own culture the way they interact and communicate, they sign a lot because for deaf people in India, we have a lot of deaf people, deaf children whose parents are hearing. So around 95% of children are born to hearing parents. So, they do not have much communication at home with their parents because they do not sign much. So, they have so many things to express and they are not able to express it at home. So around 5% of the population deaf children may be born to deaf parents, they are unable to communicate with, but for the 95% of them, they are not able to communicate when they go to school or when they meet other deaf people outside or when they go to the clubs or go to the deaf associations. When they go there, so when they meet other deaf people and they can sign and understand each other, so completely express whatever the feelings are. They were not able to do that at home, and at this place are able to do that. So, the deaf community and the culture you have it there. They are imbibed very later in life. So deaf people also have their own communication well just like how we have other spoken languages like English, Telugu or Tamil.

So similarly deaf people also have their own language which they use for interacting with others. Right now, in India, we have a lot of schools for the deaf, around 80 to 70 school for deaf, but where the sign language is used in education in the schools, around 3 to 6 schools only use sign language in education where you have teachers using sign language to teach lessons from the textbook. So, so later on when these children go to colleges or higher studies, we do not have sign language used much in colleges. We have a lot of mainstreaming, which is happening. So there probably you could have an interpreter in the classroom or if the interpreter is not available, then they ask their peers to help them to teach them what happens in the class or you have to self-study or do our own analysis and it is very hard for them. So, it is really difficult for deaf people to go for highest studies. So even in the schools, the quality of education apart from the schools of the deaf, other schools where deaf children are studying, it is very difficult for them to now develop the language. Say, for example, for deaf children the hearing loss is not the same, some children might have around 40 to 60% hearing loss, some might have a very profound hearing loss.

So, for children who have profound hearing loss and for those who can hear a little bit, for example they have around 40% 60% hearing loss, for those children hearing aids, cochlear implants might help, but they still need a lot of training. So, in some of the

schools, these kinds of children for example we have 100 children a class and then we have a child using cochlear implants and then we have a child who is having profound deafness. So, the way they learn it is very different. Some of them may have better capacity to learn, maybe he is able to hear well. And some of them might not be able to hear well and could lip read. And there is a child with profound deafness he needs signing. So, there are different methods that has to be used. So, some of them might be able to hear and lip read and they could mainstream and go for higher education, so that is one way. But those who use hearing aids and lip read and while they go for higher education, they should sit right in front of the classroom to understand what the teacher is saying. So, I am not sure how well they would do.

For those who have a profound hearing loss, they might be having difficulty with spoken languages, but they might be able to sign very well. So, when they go for education, they might not be able to understand the lessons and might not be able to understand the teachers because they do not use sign language. If they have an interpreter, then it might work out. So, there are different ways. So, we are all deaf people, but in inside that we have different needs. So, in India, I have seen a lot of deaf people use sign language for communication, a lot of them use sign language because it is the most natural language for us and so we do not have to really attempt to learn the language that is completely natural and we can talk about anything. So, even in some of the families the sign languages are used naturally. So, for hearing parents if they can learn sign language it would be easier for them to communicate along with their children. So that is the best way to do. So over to Nita now.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: It was great. Thank you, Rahul. Now, we are still waiting for Mr. Gopalakrishnan's internet to be sorted and join us to continue his presentation. So can I ask Rahul to tell us about the community and the culture of deaf people.

Rahul Jain: Yes, definitely. In the deaf community, they have a particular culture. First thing is the language which is completely different. There are certain behaviors and traits which are a little different. For example, hearing people they need not look at each other, but they speak to each other because they can use the hearing. But for deaf people, they always need to be facing each other, they have to look at the other person while signing so they cannot move their gaze away. So, if the deaf person moves his look somewhere else, then we cannot sign anymore so, we get interrupted. So, that is one thing.

So, there are a lot of other things about deaf culture. Many things are similar and a lot of other things are also different.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Great. Thank you, Rahul for that. So, I quickly just talk about deafness. So far you have seen Mr. Gopalakrishnan and you have seen Rahul here using sign language and that is the language that Dr. Hemachandran was talking about and that is a very visual language which is known as sign language. And as you could see, they were both using sign language and we had an interpreter Amaresh who was able to voice seamlessly and help all of us understand what they are trying to interpret. So, now this is unique to deaf people, it is a language that is used by them and by their family, their siblings or children who are using sign language, right. So, this becomes the community.

So, people who are using sign language form part of the deaf community who are embracing sign language as their language. Now, I would like to also talk about a bit of history to link to how sign language has come about into today's world where everybody wants to know about sign language, it is gaining popularity, but what was it earlier on? So, as we know whoever is being in the disability sector also understands that there are different models or different ways that disability is being looked at. The most popular one is called the medical model where a disability is looked at as something that needs to be fixed, something that needs to be repaired. So, when it is being looked through that lens, then deaf people are needed to have support to make their hearing possible again. So, technology like hearing aids or cochlear implants along with therapies for speaking and hearing is given and that is the medical model and that was what was prevalent many years ago.

And later on, this slowly moved towards the social model where it was looked at that the society needs to be able to adjust to include people with deafness. It was the other way around. So, in the medical model, the people with deafness had to be repaired so that they can be part of the larger community. Whereas now the social model was slowly moving towards looking at the society changing or accepting people with deafness to be included so they had to do some changes. And the third and the more recent model is the cultural and linguistic model. Deafness is a very invisible disability, you cannot see it like any other disability, you can see and identify, but deafness is something you cannot see and which is why many people are not able to recognize the needs and wants of deaf people. So, now linking it back to the language that they have which is the sign

language, visual language, it is like two sides of a coin; culture and language are the two sides of a coin.

So, deaf people have their own culture which is very similar yet distinctly different from the majority of the culture who are not deaf. So, that was brought about in the cultural and linguistic model where deafness and their community and their culture because of the use of sign language was looked at very closely. But if you look at India today, all these three models are coexisting together. It is not one or the other, but it is all together.

So, like how Rahul explained about the deaf community and there is a distinct culture, this comes from the sign language which we will talk about tomorrow in detail about what are the different, beauty of the language? And is it complete? Is it like the popular views of language? Can sign language be put in as a language in its own right? Does it have a dictionary? Is it growing? Is it being documented? And these are different questions that many people would ask who are in the linguistics field, who are in the academic field as well, right. So, we will talk more about that tomorrow. So, moving on to the next bit, I would like to ask Mr. Gopalakrishnan to take us through how sign language today is being recognized and what are the different ways that it is being recognized? Whether it is in the law, whether it is through institutions? Can you please tell us?

Gopalakrishnan Venkataraman: Thank you very much. Thank you, Nita. Thank you, Rahul for your presentation. Previously, when I was born deaf you know like, the reason for that was because during delivery they used forceps to pull me out. In India, I met a lot of deaf people. The main issue is probably they have different causes how they became deaf, maybe due to loud explosions or due to some sickness or due to various other reasons. There are some deaf children who are born deaf and some of them will acquire deafness at a later age. So, for them, they might be able to understand sounds, but for those who are born deaf the main language is sign language because it is more visual. In a social setting, for a deaf person in a family or with relatives, when they communicate with each other, talk to each other, we do not understand much.

So, there are a lot of issues that the deaf people are facing and due to absence or due to the nonacceptance of sign language. So just rephrasing the question Nita had asked. So to response to that, while India got independence at around the 1947, at that point in time sign language was not allowed to be used much. The reason for that was because around

1880s there was a conference in Milan in Italy where they banned the use of sign language in schools. At that point of time, teachers were not very much interested to use sign language, they wanted to propagate speech with deaf children, so that is why that kind of decision was made. But we had a lot of people from the United Kingdom and the people who are like Dr. Madan who had come to India to try and propagate sign language. Slowly sign language was used and propagated and advocated for.

Since 2000 since the millennium, the whole scenario changed. So, just like how the Coronavirus, just before the Coronavirus we had a different kind of life and after that now we have a different kind of life. So, since the millennium, **so** the whole scenario changed and now sign language is being used everywhere. So, we have lot of sign language channels which provide news and sign languages like MDN and ISH. So, we did not have much of sign language use before. So, right now we are trying to advocate with the government, campaign with the government to have the Indian sign language as one of the official languages. So, we have materials in sign languages and sign language used in schools. And in public places, for example at the railway stations, when announcements are made it has to be made using sign languages and a lot of accessibility issues can be resolved, a lot of communication issues can be resolved. For example, if I get caught with the police, so how do I communicate with them. So, if sign language is made as an official language, then a lot of issues can be resolved. Thank you very much.