

DID YOU KNOW?

Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre

Sonam Shree*

INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE: A SILENT SYMPHONY OF COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

Language is the medium through which thoughts, emotions, and experiences are shared, forming the foundation of human connection. While spoken languages are the most widely used means of communication, they are not the only ones. Sign languages offer a unique and profound way for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community to communicate, connect and express themselves. One such is the Indian Sign Language (ISL). The common perception is that deaf people communicate through gestures, which are limited in nature. However, sign languages possess intricate grammar and rich cultural significance. The ISL plays a pivotal role in shaping the lives of millions in India, bridging communication barriers and enriching cultural diversity.



CULTURAL ROOTS

The history of sign languages dates back centuries, and Indian Sign Language is no exception. The roots of Indian Sign Language can be traced back to ancient times when gestural communication was used to bridge linguistic barriers. However, it was only in the late 20th century that efforts were systematically undertaken to develop and promote ISL as a legitimate language. Before this, various regions in India had their own localised sign languages, influenced

* Junior Project Fellow, Department of Elementary Education, NCERT, New Delhi.

by the diversity of spoken languages.

The establishment of the Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre (ISLRTC) in 1987, under the aegis of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, marked a milestone in the recognition and standardisation of ISL. This government-initiated organisation aimed to research, document and promote ISL, ensuring a cohesive and comprehensive sign language system that would bridge communication gaps for the deaf community. ISLRTC's efforts have focused on creating a standardised ISL vocabulary, grammar and training materials to ensure consistent and effective communication.

Unique Linguistic Features

Indian Sign Language, like its spoken counterparts, has its own linguistic characteristics, like grammar, syntax and vocabulary, that make it a distinct and complex form of communication. Visual and gestural elements are the core of ISL, relying on facial expressions, hand movements, and body postures to convey meaning. Unlike spoken languages, which use auditory cues, ISL relies heavily on visual and gestural elements to convey meaning.

One of the intriguing aspects of ISL is its use of classifiers, which are handshapes that represent categories of objects, actions, or people. These classifiers enable a more detailed and vivid description of concepts, making

ISL a highly expressive language capable of conveying nuances that may be challenging in spoken languages.

Empowerment and Inclusion

Indian Sign Language plays a pivotal role in empowering the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. Prior to its recognition and formalisation, many deaf individuals faced barriers in education, employment, and social interaction due to the lack of a standardised communication system. ISL has transformed lives by providing a platform for the deaf to learn, communicate, and access information.

Education is a fundamental right, and Indian Sign Language has played a transformative role in ensuring this right for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals. In the past, many deaf children struggled to access education because in mainstream educational settings, communication was predominantly spoken. With the incorporation of ISL into classrooms, deaf students can now access education. Educational institutions have increasingly integrated sign language into their curriculum. This inclusion has not only improved academic outcomes but also boosted the self-esteem and confidence of deaf students.

Cultural Identity and Expression

Language is not just a tool for communication; it also shapes cultural identity and expression. Indian Sign

Language serves as a vehicle for cultural preservation and expression within the deaf community. Through ISL, deaf individuals share stories, folklore, and traditions, creating a unique cultural tapestry that is distinct from spoken language cultures.

Deaf cultural events, performances and gatherings provide spaces where ISL becomes a vibrant and integral part of the experience. These events not only promote the language but also strengthen the sense of community among the deaf population, fostering a shared cultural identity that transcends auditory boundaries.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the progress made in promoting Indian Sign Language, challenges persist. One major challenge is the lack of awareness and understanding among the general population. Misconceptions about ISL and deafness can lead to communication breakdowns and social isolation. Efforts to raise awareness and educate the public about ISL are crucial to building an inclusive society.

Another challenge lies in the scarcity of skilled ISL interpreters. Professional interpreters play a pivotal role in facilitating communication between the deaf community and the larger society, especially in settings such as healthcare, legal proceedings and public services. Expanding interpreter training programmes and enhancing their accessibility is essential to bridge this gap.

Future Prospects and Digital Advancements

In the digital era, Indian Sign Language has found new avenues for growth and visibility. Social media platforms and online content creation have enabled deaf individuals to share their perspectives, stories, and knowledge with a global audience. Videos, tutorials, and vlogs in ISL have become valuable resources for learning the language and gaining insights into the deaf community's experiences.

Additionally, technology has facilitated the creation of digital tools and resources to teach ISL more widely. Mobile apps, online courses, and video tutorials are making ISL education accessible to anyone interested in learning the language, thereby contributing to its widespread dissemination.

ISLRTC' Tableaux at Republic Day Parade

In 2021, at the 72nd Republic Day, 17 states and association domains featured their tableaux, in six verbal regional language. A tableau was also featured in Indian Sign Language. It provides for the general public a more prominent feeling of inclusivity in the midst of the social diversity.

The theme of the tableau is '*Bharatiya Sanketik Bhasha: Ek Rashtra, Ek Sanketik Bhasha*'.

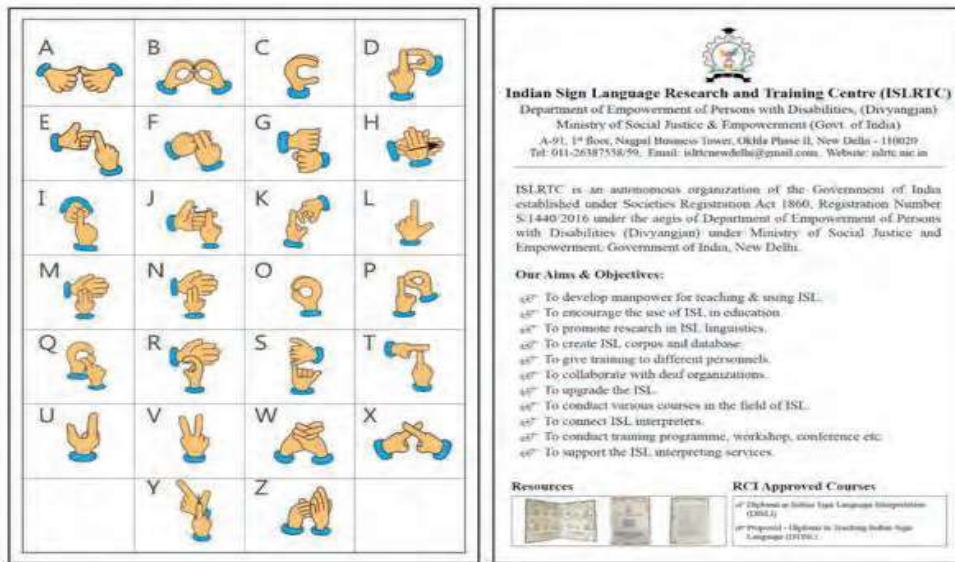
A group of 12 young people from ISLRTC were actively interacting with each other and with individuals from different tableaux contingents in the vicinity of the camp at Delhi

Cantonment. They will be unable to tell that verbally, however, through non-verbal motions they have conveyed their happiness, said Shavita Sharma of the organisation.

Sharma of the ISLRTC expressed, because of Corona virus everybody is wearing a mask, thus, it is challenging for those with hearing handicaps to impart as, “they can’t see facial expressions”. Thus, at many spots

outside, transparent masks were presented so they could comprehend and decipher the lips movement and expressions.

Delhi-based ISLRTC, under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, conducts courses for developing Indian Sign Languages interpreters and teachers and provides interpretation services to different occasions.



CONCLUSION

Indian Sign Language is more than a mere mode of communication; it’s a symphony of gestures, expressions and cultural significance. It provides a powerful means for the deaf and hard-of-hearing to interact, learn and share their stories. As ISL gains recognition and acceptance, it reinforces the idea that linguistic diversity is an integral part of human society.

Through Indian Sign Language, we witness the resilience of the human spirit and the capacity of language to transcend auditory limitations. ISL is not just about bridging communication gaps; it’s about building bridges of understanding, acceptance and inclusivity. As society continues to evolve, embracing and celebrating Indian Sign Language is a testament to the beauty of diversity and the strength of human connection.