

# The story of Indian sign language and deaf culture

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IF one asks a teacher in preschool learning spaces in India, about the most usual story that is narrated to children, what is the most common answer? Will there be unanimity in the fact that the story of Thirsty Crow works just as well in many Indian languages, as it does in Indian Sign Language?<sup>1</sup>

Those who engage with early childhood care and learning would often stress upon the need to have a visually rich environment in these learning spaces, full of picture books and enthusiastic teachers who never give up a chance to bring out yet another story.

Growing up in a Gujarati-speaking middle class family, I had a similar experience of listening to lullabies and rhyming stories. However, today, I wonder what stories would have been told to me, if I had the fate of being born deaf to non-deaf parents, in India.

Having studied English literature and linguistics, I have heard about the

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=le89WsKWvOE>

problem of language endangerment in India. However, I only started thinking about the deaf community and culture in India as a result of my coursework for my research degree, Stuart Blume's writings on Cochlear Implants, as well as my friend's doctoral research on Indian Sign Language.

One morning while visiting Indian Social Forum in Nehru Stadium in November 2006, I met a volunteer who handed to me and my friend a pamphlet that demanded that Indian Sign Language be made part of the eighth schedule. I came back home that day and tried to think of writing a reflective essay imagining thoughts from the point of view of that deaf volunteer who handed us the pamphlet on Indian Sign Language and Deaf Culture in India. This reflective note stated:

'Can explorations in/of open space turn out to be restraining rather than ensuring reliability in the promise of possible another world? Imagine drumbeats, dances, theatre groups performing, several stalls displaying literature, and several meeting places to

discuss and debate issues. No, I am not talking about silence (or its Indian spiritual variant, *moun*) as a possible and alternative mode of protest. I am just pleading with you, to lend me your eyes – eyes, I repeat, not ears – to gaze at what I have to convey, for signs, and signs are all I have, to demonstrate other modes of life, language, and protest.

‘You met me the other day while walking in. I tried to befriend you with a smile, handing over to you a little printed folder with more words from your language and less from mine, asking our State to grant my language an 8th schedule status. You were hurrying to go somewhere. Your friend brought both his palms near lips and tried to sign “Thank you” to me, I smiled back. I could gaze that you were a man of letters, as you tried to use the script of your language, the script of that language at the heart of the global market. I can raise my arm, and not my voice in shrill pitch to compete amidst cacophony; but will you lend me – no, no don’t get me wrong, I don’t need your surrogate voice – you are here to gaze at my smile and signs? For signs, and signs are all I have.’

When I shared this reflection with a friend who has researched deafness, she wrote back with a question:

‘If you don’t mind me asking, are you yourself deaf or hearing? It does not really matter either way, and I am not one of those people who argue that hearing people cannot write about deaf experiences. One thing that does come up for me though is that it seems to me that when hearing people write about deaf experiences, they tend to overly focus on/fetishize the dichotomy between noise and silence and in doing so they misrepresent what deaf experiences and deaf activism are often about – a desire for everyone to sign. And so, when you write in your piece about noise and the hegemony of noise, it seems to me that this is a hearing and not a deaf perspective. What do you think?’

In reminding me about paying attention to deaf experiences, she had underlined the dream cherished by Deaf adults. This almost utopian dream that deaf adults carry in their hearts is to see everyone sign.

A documentary film made by Carrol Duffy Clay, *Deaf Community in India* (2007) brings to viewers the world of Indian deaf adults<sup>2</sup>. It shows us Indian deaf adults narrating their struggles while growing up and starts with animated conversations that flow when they meet for a party. As they recount their early years, we get to see what role would have been played by the presence of Indian Sign Language during those critical years of language acquisition. We meet deaf adults who recount how they discovered deaf culture through Indian Sign Language and these stories about getting immersed into the visual language invariably make them recount how they spotted others communicate by using signing around them.

The early years of growing up as a deaf girl were full of suffering for Abigail Beilfuss, and she realized her potential through the efforts of her father Arun C. Rao who started to explore the world of visual language by first referring to ASL dictionaries when she was three years old and later through Indian Sign Language. Abigail says:

‘(Billy Read and I) worked together to encourage deaf children in different countries to do many activities. That is when I learned many sign languages. For a deaf person, it is very easy to learn sign languages. Sign languages are visual languages, the most natural form of communication for the deaf. For me, it was more difficult to learn how to speak and to understand speech. But while using sign language it was very easy for me to follow conversations.’<sup>3</sup>

2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Poq5Ot5rbGs>

The two-part memoirs of Madan Vasishtha, *Deaf in Delhi* and *Deaf in DC* brings to us the deaf culture in India. Recounting his discovery of the deaf community and culture at the age of 20, when he received a scholarship to learn photography in Delhi, Vasishtha writes, in a chapter titled ‘Why are they flailing their hands’:

‘Suddenly, I saw the strangest thing in my life. One of the students, I learned later his name was Khurana, suddenly began to gesture wildly to the other student, Goel. I looked in amazement and wondered what he was doing. People had often gestured to me and I had always successfully managed to misunderstand them. However, Goel seemed to be responding to Khurana with equal zeal, with his hands and fingers traveling in a curious but rhythmic movement that was not even close to gesturing...’

‘I kept looking at them as if hypnotized and followed their hand movements...’

‘I stood there and the thought suddenly hit me: The two were actually “talking” with each other. The idea that people could communicate with their hands and, worse still, that people could understand this wild flailing of hands and fingers, was just inconceivable to me. However, their expressive faces and mannerisms demonstrated that they were communicating with each other just like two hearing people would communicate by speaking.’

‘I had an idea and walked to the AIFD office and asked one of the assistants where and how I could learn to sign. He smiled and tried to talk to me, and when he learned I could not lipread, he wrote on a piece of paper, “Why do you want to learn signs? You speak very well. You do not need to sign like them.” He was hearing, did not know signs, and thought signing

3. A short bio note on Abigail Beilfuss tells us more about her contribution to the cause of Indian Sign Language and deaf culture, <http://deafrolemodels.blogspot.com/2017/09/abigail-beilfuss.html>

was something inferior to speaking. I insisted and he gave up. He looked around and found a small post card and gave it to me. This was an alphabet card that pictured handshapes next to each letter. The assistant told me these were fingerspelling shapes, saying, "I think this will meet your need".

'We were using Indian Sign Language (ISL). Of course, no one called it that. It was just "signs". I became fascinated with this language. Each day I picked up more signs, and by the end of the week, I was able to fully communicate with my two new friends and Mr Goyle. I fell in love with sign language. It opened up a whole new world for me. Within a couple of weeks, I was also flailing my arms and fingers!'<sup>4</sup>

In 1984, when Sibaji Panda was 10 years old, he became deaf, but he found sign language support at home, since his elder brother was also deaf. He met Ulrike Zeeshan, a German professor who came to India to research Indian Sign Language, while he was working with Delhi Foundation for Deaf Women as a computer trainer.<sup>5</sup> This led to many collaborative projects, starting with the first formal one-year Indian Sign Language training course used by the Rehabilitation Council of India and the Ali Yavar Jung Institute of Speech and Hearing Disabilities.

In 1967, when Madan Vasishta was 26 years old, he got admission to Gallaudet University in Washington DC. Many years later, in an interview with Sarika Mehta for South Asian American Digital Archive, Vasishta recalls his early days saying:

'Another thing is that when I had first flown to the US, I was a student learning about American culture. In those days, we never talked about deaf culture. That wasn't a topic of discussion. And we

didn't call it ASL (American Sign Language). Nothing like that! Just... signing. There was no separation between American culture and deaf culture. I was really shocked by the kind of questions people asked me about India – what little knowledge they had!'<sup>6</sup>

In another interview with Sarika Mehta for South Asian American Digital Archive, Madan Vasishta comments about the state of Deaf education in India:

'Even at IGNOU, people involved in the programme see sign language and wonder what it is. It's hard for them to accept the fact that deaf people can do something here. They look at me and wonder, how can I have such a high position. For example, I require that all hired professors at the Centre should already know sign language. But everyone else felt that wasn't necessary, we could just hire an interpreter. They felt the priority was having a high level of education, not sign language. They still look down upon sign language as being lower class. The challenge is this idea of accepting sign language as a real language.'<sup>7</sup>

Bringing Indian Sign Language to early childhood learning spaces would do wonders. Creating an immersive experience for children before they enter school years by making available in these spaces Indian Sign Language resources (and then taking such initiatives to schools, colleges, and community spaces) would allow us to slowly move toward that dream cherished by deaf adults, namely, to see everyone sign.

5. A short bio note on Sibaji Panda tells us more about his contribution to the cause of Indian Sign Language, see <http://deafrolemodels.blogspot.com/2017/08/sibaji-panda.html>

6. Sarika Mehta, 'Madan Vasishta's First Day', First Days Project, South Asian American Digital Archive, (undated) <https://firstdays.saada.org/story/madan-vasishta>

7. Sarika Mehta, (first curated on 9 July 2013, modified on 16 August 2016), Interview with Madan Vasishta, South Asian American Digital Archive, <https://www.saada.org/item/20130709-2983>

4. Madan Vasishta, *Deaf in Delhi: A Memoir*. Deaf Lives Series, Gallaudet University Press, Washington DC, 2006, pp. 98-101.