TOWARDS EMPOWERING INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

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0. Introduction

This paper is divided into three broad sections. First, it discusses about sign language and its status in the league of natural human language. Secondly, I will discuss various constructs on deaf, and the resultant discrimination associated with deafness. Deaf as a culture, a linguistic minority is discussed in the next section to highlight the issue of linguistic human rights with respect to the Indian Deaf community and Indian Sign Language. The paper explores the intermediatory role of the discipline of linguistics between language and linguistic rights. Finally, the paper questions the role, problems and prospects with respect to academia in empowering Indian Deaf community in the emerging social, educational and academic context.

The basic question one might entertain about sign language is- is it a natural human language? I think this question in itself is a good beginning to know and learn more about sign language. Moreover, it is important in the Indian context to establish about the linguistic status of sign language. The answer is, though might be difficult for some to accept and agree initially, that sign language is a natural human language.

1. Sign Language[1]

For a long time, though there was no scientific endeavour to study sign language of the deaf people. From the Hellenic thinkers onwards various speculations and hypotheses have been put forward about sign language but they were struck by modality. For a long time, the ideas on sign language was suppressed due to Aristotle's pronouncement that symbols had to be speech, which lead sign language into a 'dark age' for another two thousand years. In the medieval period, the then existing notion to teach the deaf person to speak, read and write spoken language was prevalent and practised. Therefore, for a long period, sign was not conceived as a tool to teach deaf people and the oralism remained dominant.

From the 16$^{th.}$ century onwards, philosophical works of Cardan, Rousseau, La Mettrie, Helvétius, Vico lead to the new ideas on deaf education. The results of such speculations led indirectly to the development of teaching method for deaf through sign. Consequently, following Yebra and Bonnet, de l'Ėpée founded a free school for deaf in Paris in and was devising methodical signs for deaf education. With the introduction of signing method to teach deaf by l'Ėpée, the real history of sign language commenced.

The establishment of the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons (later renamed, the American School for the Deaf) in Hartford, Connecticut in 1817, further reinforced the use of sign language as the medium of instruction and deaf faculty. Gallaudet University (former, Gallaudet College) remained a solid and powerful bastion of sign language despite mounting pressure of oralism in the late 19th and early 20th century (Cleve & Crouch 1989: 74), and as the first and the only deaf university in the world.

1.2 Sign Language and Linguistics

[1] 'Sign' and 'signed', in principle, have no distinction in the sign linguistics literature.

With the dawn of the Saussurean linguistics, and its consequent emphasis on arbitrariness, sign language on the basis of its iconic basis was denied in a league of languages as a natural language. On the basis of the iconic aspect, it is generally assumed that there is a sign language and it is universally intelligible. However, the paradox is that Indian Sign Language is not Chinese Sign Language and vice-versa. Moreover, American Sign Language and French Sign Language have a common origin in Old French Sign Language, yet today they are mutually unintelligible.

The first generation American structuralists dismissed sign language as a derivative of spoken language continuing the phonocentric 20th century American linguistic tradition that equated language and speech. They grouped sign languages together with language surrogates lacking the syntactic, morphological, and phonological properties of natural languages, which have been influenced by studies of the Plains Indian Sign Language published in the 1880s and the 1890s.

The linguistic study of signed language is about fifty years old yet it has made not only a tremendous impact on linguistic theory. The publication of *Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication System of the American Deaf* by Stokoe in 1960, provided a system for describing signed language and for the first time in history- a method to notate signed language. Stokoe (1960) followed the structural analysis of sign and demonstrated that the sublexical structure of signs could be described by a finite set of discrete, arbitrary units, which are linguistically combined. It eventually brought about a new linguistic turn, bringing an end to the glottocentric view on language. This lead to the birth of new discipline in linguistics– signed linguistics. Stokoe's seminal work eliminated the age-old prejudice against signed language, and acknowledges its status as a natural human language in a different modality. His seminal work also induced phylogenesis of human language and linguistic philosophy in general.

Later, Klima, Bellugi and their collaborators at the Salk Institute further revolutionized our understanding of sign language, and brought us into an era from where onwards we started to see how universal grammatical categories and features are realised in a four dimensional medium and constraints on the overt expression of linguistic form. They convinced the neurological world that lesion on right hemisphere shows deficits in spatial processing rather than on use of sign. Their study proves that the right hemisphere damage does not result in sign aphasia, and the left hemisphere does. Hickok, et al. (1999) shows that right cerebral hemisphere damage does not impair sign language processing at the grammatical level but disrupts at the discourse level in cross sentence integration and organisation as in spoken language. Petitto & Marentette's (1991) cross linguistic and cross modality studies reveal that the acquisition of sign language is on an identical maturational time course as hearing children acquire spoken languages with the identical stages of acquisition and development. Woodward (1972) and others studied the sociolinguistic aspect of sign language.

Sign and spoken language share extensive properties and grammatical correlates but crucially, also exhibit substantial differences in structure and organisation. With the growth of the discipline of sign linguistics both in terms of coverage of languages and structures, it is found that all sign languages exhibit some features of which there are no parallels in spoken languages. There are sign language universals too and show strong cross-linguistic similarities in its morphology and spatial syntax. Many of the sign

languages show a very high degree of mutual intelligibility, compared to spoken languages.

On the psychobiology of human cognition, Chomsky meant a language as a specific signal-meaning correspondence incorporating sign language in the study of which "will bring to light inherent properties of the human mind" (Chomsky 1972: 103). After two decades, Liberman & Mattingly (1985) suggested that the biological foundations of grammatical structures are not to be found exclusively in some privileged interaction between cognitive capacity and the auditory-vocal system (philosophical grounding for the same was laid by Cardan in the 16th century). This is the final blow to the phonocentric approach in the study of natural human language and the advent of understanding language in modality other than spoken into account. Hauser, Chomsky, & Fitch (2002, in press), in their influential article, based on comparative perspective, distinguishes natural human language in both the known modality, speech and sign, from animal communication systems on the basis of rich expressive and open endedness based on humans' capacity for recursion, which is recently evolved.

Within linguistics, the study of sign language has gained important place with respect to universals and typology of human languages. Comrie (1981:221) writes, "it is conceivable that certain other universals of spoken languages might in turn correlate with properties of the medium, rather than necessarily, with the human linguistic faculty at a more abstract level." The modality differences and similarities are crucial in the understanding of UG. The current conceptions about the design of FL as being moulded by the requirements of the external performance systems have been considered to have significant impact on the overall architecture of FL.

2. Constructing Deaf and creating discrimination

The hearing majority, historically, has defined deafness by imagining themselves without hearing. The views on deafness are conceived on the various metaphysical notions associated with the human voice. In almost all the religious beliefs deafness was considered as a malady and a hindrance to salvation on account of lack of hearing. The preoccupation with sound as fundamental and sacred in all religions led signing not as an equivalent of speech.

With this belief in background, in ancient, medieval and even in the modern times the physicians' world was built around the sound and hence, a desire for a hearing world. They conceived deafness as a pathological condition that should be eliminated through the medical intervention. From the prophets to the traditional healers to the audiologists to the speech therapists to the cochlear implant surgeons, the technology and sophistication changed but the basic idea of intervention remains the same to make the deaf as much hearing as possible to 'fix the divine flaw' rather than 'a part of the divine design'.

With the onset of medical intervention in the emerging political and economic reality (industrial capitalism), the pathological view on deafness emerged as a handicap due to auditory deficiency. With the emergence of such a construction on deafness, there also emerged a professional group and services, whose livelihood and existence depends upon 'bestow benevolence on *deaf* people defined as in need' (Gusfield 1989: 432, added italics mine). Therefore, deafness becomes a 'need' to take the professional advice and services tailored to an individual need, making deaf a handicap. The pathological view

tried to normalise deaf by enforcing deaf to abandon sign in favour of spoken language and lip reading as a sign of normalisation, paradoxically making them linguistically handicap. Therefore, deafness did not lead to being handicap; rather, intervention makes deafness a handicap. The eugenic movements derived out of the pathological view proved an exercise over individual will, belief, culture, and consequently became to prove an obstacle in the empowerment of deaf community.

The contemporary discourse on deafness is hinged on two newer constructions- as a disability and as a linguistic minority, a shift from an individual malady to a social problem. Both the constructs are nurtured by the disabled people's campaign for equality and full participation in all spheres of social life and human rights, and the personal accounts, which have become politically meaningful and powerful as they gave impetus to understand and challenge disabling barriers.

Like racism and sexism, audism[2], insists that inherent biological factors determine individual traits and capacity on account of which deaf have been excluded from aspects of life, and has been associated with loss. Such perception of deaf, undoubtedly, leads to identify deaf as disabled. Deaf as a disability identity, however, is based on the audist's perception. More important and deciding (depending upon political articulation) is conception- what does deaf mean to deaf people?

It is a well-known fact that the experiences of disability varies from people, culture and in history. It depends upon social circumstance. It is a well documented that the western deaf societies had rejected the view that they are disabled. They resist the label of disability and do not identify as disabled. The theorisation of disability within the materialistic framework runs counter to the conception of deaf as they do not conceive deafness as a loss, rather as a gain in terms of culture, language, values, etc., and such belief leads them to reject that they have impairment and/or disability. As a gain, they conceive themselves as a culture disregarding as a minority construct, which establishes the disabled-non-disabled distinction and in disciplining disability. Their exclusion is related to language, culture rather than by the traditional barriers (Thomas 2002). On the other hand, disability as a minority seeks total social integration through care, services, and assistance. To the contrary, deaf cherish their unique identity and seek integration not at the cost of identity of Deaf as a culture and not through care, service, and assistance, but at the honour of their different culture and language. The deaf people outwardly rejected another construct 'hearing impaired' to include deaf and hard of hearing people, which overlooked and ignored linguistic and cultural difference between the deaf and the hard of hearing.

Deaf people in any society function as a minority vis-à-vis the hearing population. Apart from the demographic factor, there are several reasons to label deaf people as a minority. Deaf people have been subject to oppression, or discrimination by the dominant hearing groups in all societies with respect to their values, culture, and language. This discrimination based on language, culture and values is accounted for minority construction (Lane 1995). In the past, deaf people have been subject to discrimination and still continue in many societies today. In the developing societies, the majority of deaf children do not have access to education, and in most of the cases, the educational ideology pursued for deaf education runs contrary to their right to receive mother tongue education. Their human rights have been violated and are discriminated in every walk of

[2] Term coined by Humphries (1977) to refer to socially constructed set of meanings of deaf.

life. Their linguistic rights have been crushed under the yoke of phonocentricism. As their sign language has been subject to oppression, they have been called a linguistic minority (Andersson 1994: 9).

Deafness as a social problem gave an impetus in forming deaf people together, which later took the shape of community with its own values, language, culture, endogamous marital patterns, etc. The Deaf[3] are those who identify themselves as the member of the Deaf community and are culturally Deaf. The deaf are those who do not sign and regard themselves as having hearing impairment (Napier 2002: 141). A group of Deaf and hearing people who work to achieve certain goals belong to the deaf community, and to which Deaf members of that community belong to is the Deaf culture. The most fundamental aspect of membership of the community is attitudinal deafness i.e. one's identification as a member of the community (which means supporting the values of the community), and one's acceptance by the other members of the community (Baker-Shenk & Cokely 1980: 55). The knowledge of sign language has been the genesis of formation of community and culture and has shaped identity. Thus, it is through sign language, deaf people construct their 'Deaf world view' and make sense of the world around them (Reagan 1995: 247).

3. Indian Deaf community and Indian Sign Language

The deaf population in India is 14 million[4], comprising 1.4% of the total Indian population. The Indian Deaf community is primarily based in the urban areas, where deaf schools, deaf clubs and organisations are located. The deaf community in India consists of people from different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The members remain a part of their parent's cultural and ethnic background while maintaining the membership of the deaf community at the same time. On the other hand, hearing people born of deaf/hearing parents or who knows sign language are members of the Deaf community. The Indian Deaf community is primarily a cultural minority bound together by use of sign language and Deaf cultural values rather than by other primordial values. They are organised through deaf clubs and associations.

The Indian state's attitude towards the deaf citizens is pathologising and patchy, hence, they are covered under the blanket of disability. The Indian Deaf community members find themselves as a handicap, a disabled, a hearing impaired. Such constructs are defined by the structural and cultural forces acting upon them rather than they conceive of themselves. They identify themselves as a 'deaf', and distinguish hearing as 'normal'. However, with the increasing politicisation of the members, such constructions are challenged. The educated members of the community identify themselves a 'Deaf', a linguistic minority. Moreover, with the greater involvement with other Deaf communities across the world through web, the educated members have shaped the concerns in the Indian Deaf community for dignity, equality and justice.

Within this superstructure of Indian Deaf community, there are several regional communities, whose study is yet to be undertaken. However, many such claims are like at

[3] Woodward (1972) established the convention to distinguish Deaf from deaf.

[4] By Dr. Madan Vasishta as cited in *Indian Sign Language Dictionary*, 2001.

Silent Village, Karnataka found in 1991 in a remote forest tract[5] and at Dhidkhai in Kashmir[6] are hoax[7].

Of the 14 million deaf population of India, all the members of the population do not sign or share Deaf culture due to variety of rhymes and reasons. Within the Deaf community in India, a continuum of sign language use exists due to several socio-linguistic-educational factors ranging from Pidgin Sign English using the Indian Sign Language lexicon and English grammatical structures, American Sign Language and British Sign Language signs and structures to the indigenous Indian Sign Language[8].

Several claims have been made so far about lexicon and grammatical structure of SL in India. Vasishta, Woodward & Wilson (1978:68-9) claim that the lexical similarity is over 90% in Delhi, Bombay (now Mumbai), Bangalore and Calcutta, and "there is only one Indian Sign Language". Jepson (1991: 39) claim that Urban Indian Sign Language is pan-Indian. On the other hand, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya and CBM International have brought out the first *Indian Sign Language Dictionary* in 2001 reporting that 42% of signs are common all over India. Woodward (1993) establishes relatedness of sign languages of India, Pakistan and Nepal on the lexical basis. Zeshan (2000) confirms the structural similarity underlying the same grammar between Indian Sign Language and Pakistani Sign Language, and call the sign language of these colonial cousins as Indo-Pakistani Sign Language. Since, sign language of the Indian sub-continent is indigenous and is genetically unrelated to sign languages of other continents (Zeshan 2003: 113; Jepson 1991: 39; Vasishta, Woodward & Wilson 1978:72), Sinha (2003) has clubbed them under a distinct family- South Asian.

Delhi and Mumbai (formerly, Bombay) show regional variations in the lexical items but not in the structures (Sinha 2003). Thus, Delhi-Bombay variety[9] (rather than varieties as generally assumed on the lexical basis) is one of the varieties of sign language of India under the generic label of Indian Sign Language. The exploration of other variety (if it holds, of Indian Sign Language) and/or language is another area of research in India.

4. Empowerment and education

The cumulative philosophical, historical, social discrimination that the Indian Deaf community has passively resisted has resulted in the suppression of Indian Sign Language, which has become a hindrance in empowering Deaf community in India, which is a linguistic minority in the present context. The most important question regarding empowering the Indian Deaf community is the most appropriate way to impart education. The key political issue in relation to policies in deaf education and beyond in India continues to be a battle, on the one hand, between signing vs. oralism, and in the other hand between Indian Sign Language and other sign languages viz. British Sign Language, American Sign Language, and Total Communication.

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[5] Source: www.projectdeafindia.org.

[6] Source: ANI/Reuters News transcript ref. 7449/01 09 July 2001.

[7] Ph.D. field trip, Spring 2005 and Sibaji Panda, Indian sign Language expert and Deaf activist (p.c.), respectively.

[8] Meher Sethna Dadabhoy, Coordinator, Indian Sign Language Cell, Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for Hearing Handicapped, Mumbai. (p.c.)

[9] Despite the change in the name of the city, variety is known by its former name.

The educational methodologies practised so far in the whole of the sub-continent are far from realising their very purpose of empowering the Deaf community. They are based on pathologising rather than empowering the Deaf community. The first institute in India to impart education to deaf, the Bombay Institute for Deaf-Mutes founded in 1882, and Calcutta Deaf and Dumb School founded in 1893, followed sign language as a medium of instruction prior to oralism. Florence Swainson for the Deaf, Palamcottah, founded as early as 1897, which professed sign language even the Church service for the deaf, which may be first public occasion where sign language was recognized as 'official' medium of communication, followed lip reading and speech training in the wake of oralism. Banerji (1950) mentions about Mohinimohan Majumdar, a founder teacher of the Calcutta School as a brilliant exponent of sign language and resonates the thought of his time, "The sign language cannot be the accepted vehicle of thought for the education of the deaf… we have no conventional sign language in India in the same sense they have in America." Sixth All-India Educational Survey (NCERT, 1998) has identified 418 special schools for the deaf where the educational methods opted for deaf students are oralism and/or Total Communication but not through sign language because of the latter's linguistic status.

Sign language, therefore, is neglected as a tool of empowerment for the deaf community. In the recent years, however, some educational institutes have started imparting education through Indian Sign Language viz. the Rotary Deaf School, Ichalkaranji, and two deaf schools at Indore, Madhya Pradesh, and Gangtok, Sikkim[10]. In India due to socio-cultural-educational and regional diversity, there exists a variation in signs. The signing system followed by the educational institutions is not uniform across the country, ranging from contrived system or American Sign Language or British Sign Language or the different Indian Sign Language varieties. Moreover, due to misconception, lack or awareness, and manpower, the most of the educational institutes does impart education through it to the Indian deaf students. Such socio-linguistic-educational chaos has resulted various Deaf communities with their own signing variety across the country.

In addition to this, the negative attitude towards signing as a medium of educating deaf children, lack of uniformity in signing in the existing deaf educational system and of effective network, lack of research, language planning processes and policies are reflected in a lack of a standard sign language in India. Culshaw (1983) discusses the efforts and the lack of standard approach in promoting sign language in the Indian deaf education system, and mentions the urgency of standardisation of Indian Sign Language. Gopalakrishnan (1998) discusses the issues of regional variation in signs and advocates for language planning, modernisation, and standardisation.

Increasingly, however, the Indian Deaf community is becoming more aware of its linguistic rights for Deaf, and the recognition of Indian Sign Language as a national sign language. However, due to the lack of detailed linguistic study of Indian Sign Language and the Indian Deaf community, the process of standardisation of Indian Sign Language are being undermined.

With the establishment of institutions like Indian Sign Language Cell, Mumbai, language policy formulation is carried out along the lines of the 'Recommendations of

[10] Dharmesh Kumar, Deaf activist and Indian Sign Language teacher, Indian Sign Language Cell, Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for Hearing Handicapped, New Delhi (p.c.).

the Commission on Sign Language' of the World Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf. The development of course materials for teaching/learning ISL, teacher training, and linguistic research on Indian Sign Language are some of the Cell's core area of activity currently. However, such efforts both at the activists' and at the institutional effort are not free from problems as linguistics is embedded within it.

5. Linguistics and rights

Despite the presence of deaf people at all times and in all societies, a systematized linguistic, political and theoretical reflection on deaf has emerged only in the middle of the last century. The notions and the beliefs associated with sign language have successfully marginalised sign language, its users, and the education system based on it. With the emergence of Deaf as a distinct culture with sign language at its forefront, and consequently, as a linguistic minority, the question of empowerment arises, how can the deaf community participate equally in the social process?

Branson & Miller (1997: 90) has identified four basic movements for the promotion and development of sign language:

- National association of the deaf people.
- Development of formal language policies.
- The movement for the achievement of linguistic human rights.
- Sign language based education system.

The All India Federation of the Deaf, a national organisation, is working on the interest of the Indian Deaf community. Apart from the national apex body, there are many associations and clubs spread across the country that have taken steps towards the empowerment of the community in the various aspects of deaf's life. Following the recommendations of the World Federation of the Deaf (1991), the national apex body has initiated its struggle.

The most significant impact that has been on life and studies of deaf is contributed by the study of signed language, which also actuates linguistic, cultural, political, educational and artistic movement. To supplement the deaf activists' efforts towards a recognition of the human linguistic rights of deaf people and other related concerns, Linguistics can address the contemporary problems by translating it into terms which our tools especially equip us to address (Dasgupta 1999).

Prior to Stokoe's seminal work, sign language used by the deaf community was considered as a primitive system of pantomime and gestures, limited than spoken language, based on spoken language, a means of communication (rather than language), and there were many such widely believed notions at its worst. The notions and the beliefs associated with sign language have successfully marginalised sign language, its users, and the education system based on it. Similar conception persists in academics and in public space about sign language and the Indian Deaf community. On the other hand, lack of research on Indian Sign Language and the Indian Deaf Community has created a vacuum in the academic discourse in the disciplines of linguistics, anthropology and sociology.

In India, sign language is not recognised as a natural human language either legally or socially or academically. The lack of research on Indian Sign Language in Indian academia has resulted indirectly to accept the fact that sign language is not a

natural human language, not good enough to carry out research on the area. This has spiralled in the other concerns of empowering Indian Deaf community and Indian Sign Language. Moreover, it has undermined other efforts like standardisation of Indian Sign Language, development of pedagogical materials, lexicon, cultural studies, etc. The comprehensive descriptive grammar of Indian Sign Language and its varieties is not only important for the discipline of linguistics itself, but also for the development of pedagogical material in Indian Sign Language. The sociolinguistic profile of the varieties, their use, and the specificity of the deaf community's social and linguistic location is intended to contribute to efforts at empowerment. To propagate and accomplish such a Promethean mission, it is foremost essential to carry out the detailed linguistic survey of Indian Sign Language and the Indian Deaf community. Such a mission is not far from conception, and can be carried out in the new Linguistic Survey of India.

However, for such a mission to be well equipped with sign language and research methodology is the basic condition as it involves the question of modality. The efforts carried out by Indian Sign Language Cell, Mumbai to teach/learn/interpret sign language is another area where linguistic expertise is the need, but due to lack of Indian researchers to pursue, such an effort at empowering is not optimally utilised. Though Deaf activists and researchers are involved in it, however, greater involvement is the need for the development of an effective research program. On the other hand, Linguistic Human Rights and Linguistic Ecology, the two most under studied topic in Indian academia particularly in its own discipline of Linguistics, are related with granting citizenship and ensuring diversity, respectively need to be addressed by the linguist's community.

Linguistic rights is considered as basic human rights embedded within the necessities for the sustenance of dignified life, including basic civil, political, and cultural rights. However, language and human rights seldom merge and are politically sensitive and inextricably interwoven with power structures, language as a means of social control and its role in ensuring social justice has its own role in safeguarding human rights. Nevertheless, often people are treated unjustly and suppressed by means of language. This is exactly the case of the Indian Deaf community and Indian Sign Language.

Linguistic human rights implies at two levels- individual and collective. Deaf's linguistic rights are violated at both the levels. At the individual level, as the case is, the majority of deaf people do not acquire sign language through traditional transmission. In such cases, they communicate in their immediate surroundings using homesigns. They are completely dependent on educational institutes where they share and feel being deaf and develop their signing. In Indian due to the policy adopted, the educational system adopted for deaf does not function through sign language but through oral and/or manual modes. The basic education is imparted not through their mother tongue i.e. Indian Sign Language. This is the first and the foremost violation of their right to use language in which they are comfortable to express better. The institutional efforts to teach deaf spoken language violate Article 17, 19, 29, 30, and 40 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), therefore, identifies oralism in formal education like professed in India as an instance of linguistic genocide.

Indian Deaf community do fulfil the criteria being minority[11] objectively. But their right of minority group to exist i.e. the right to be different and the right to enjoy and

[11] See Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson (1994: 107).

develop their language and to establish educational institutes, with control over curricula and medium of instruction are curtailed by the Indian state. The representation in the political affairs of the state, and granting autonomy to administer matter internal to the groups, at least in the fields of education, religion, culture, information, and social affairs are restricted. Such restriction on these rights is considered as an infringement of fundamental linguistic human rights.

Deaf encounter disrespect and suppression of their language at every step, which violate UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 27 has far reaching significance in human rights for granting linguistic rights, which states countries minimally have to see Deaf as a (linguistic) minority protecting against discrimination and positive language rights. In addition to it, Deaf can be seen as a disability group provided they choose to identify with it. Despite all these formulations and being signatories, the linguistic rights of Indian Deaf community is violated at all levels leading to the extent of endangering the linguistic and the cultural diversity.

The issue of linguistic rights and linguistic ecology seems to be interrelated. The linguistic rights not only promotes dignity of life but in turn promotes linguistic diversity as well as cultural diversity maintaining a healthy linguistic ecology for human survival. With the number of contributions on ecological linguistics, it has come to an understanding that 'empowering languages and making them more competitive by giving them grammars, lexicons, writing systems, and school syllabus is a recipe that ignores a basic ecological fact: What supports one language may not support another language. Each language requires its own ecological system' (Mühlhäusler 2002). Thus, within this conceptualisation of ecological linguistics, the issue of Indian Sign Language needs to be addressed.

If one has to carry out linguistic impact assessment (similar to environmental impact assessment), one would confront with a basic fact that Indian Sign Language is neglected as a part of linguistic ecology due to conceptions attached with it and its historical and contemporary contingencies attached to its users as mentioned above. Therefore, the first and foremost pre-condition that needs to be addressed is to create ecological condition which extended towards social and political ecology in which Indian Sign Language can develop and flourish (see Mühlhäusler 2002: 38).

One of the most important factors affecting the lives of deaf people in India is the status of sign language. With sign language linguistic human rights, self reliance and equal opportunities can become a reality. Finally, the linguists' community needs to address and translate the contemporary problems regarding Indian Sign Language into prospects for a better understanding of human language and in maintaining linguistic rights and ecology, to which scholarly analysts are accountable.

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