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## THE HISTORY OF ISL: ITS ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT AND RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER SIGNED AND SPOKEN LANGUAGES

This lesson helps you to know how Indian Sign Language developed, expanded and established itself over time. You will learn about the role of residential schools in its development and its past and present use in the education of the deaf. You will also learn about the influence other sign languages have had on ISL. The contribution of certain individuals, Institutes, researchers and educators towards the development of ISL are also discussed in this lesson.



### OUTCOMES

After studying this lesson, learner:

- describes the history of Indian Sign Language;
- explains the role of other signed and spoken languages in the development of ISL;
- lists some institutions in India which have worked on ISL and describe their contributions.

### 2.1 HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

#### First deaf schools:

- The first deaf school did not use sign language but had an oral education system.
- This was influenced by the 1880 Milan Conference in Italy where educators of the deaf decided to use speech for teaching the deaf across the world.
- The first deaf school was started in Bombay in 1885 (Check the fact) and second in Kolkota in 1893 (check the year).

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- The first deaf school in Delhi was started in 1931.
- The teachers were all hearing and focus was on speech.

### Role of deaf residential schools in the development of ISL:

- Most deaf schools had hostels. The deaf learners used to come from various places and stay in these hostels.
- Naturally, these hostels led to sign language use among deaf learners. They began expressing themselves through novel signs appropriate to the situation. This was an automatic process, and hence signs were created by deaf learners themselves.
- These signs were not taught by any teacher. Most teachers did not even understand these signs.
- This is how sign language evolved in India.
- Many teachers felt it is better to have same sign language across the country. They were confused by the local variations.
- Many hearing people did not fully understand signs.
- Hence deaf people used basic gestures while communicating with hearing people.
- So, it was felt that sign language is only a collection of gestures and not a language.

### Indian Sign Language and deaf education:

Mook Badhir Sangathan (MBS) was founded up in Indore in 1974. Indore Deaf Bilingual Academy (IDBA) also functions under MBS, and it is a bilingual school where sign language is included for learning. While this school offers education in sign language, most other deaf schools have only been following an oral system of education.

It was hoped that the success of bilingual education would influence other deaf schools to do the same. It was also hoped that more deaf teachers would be employed by the deaf schools. Today, many deaf schools are now open to hiring deaf teachers.

There are about 800 deaf schools in the country, but the teachers are mostly hearing and do not know sign language as it was not part of their training. They often depend on deaf learners and learn a few basic signs from them.

Most teachers in deaf schools claim to follow Total Communication (TC) which means they speak and use manual communication (mostly gestures) at the same time. However, because teachers do not understand sign language even here they rely on deaf learners to assist them with sign language.

Following the year 2000, there was a rapid increase in the number of ISL training facilities related to ISL (Interpreting courses and some ISL training for teacher trainees). However teachers are still struggling to effectively communicate in the classrooms. This is because of lack of quality ISL input during their teacher training courses.

It is hoped that teachers will learn more ISL during their training courses (D.Ed. and B.Ed.), so that they are better able to deliver education to deaf learners.

### Influences on ISL:

- ISL has been developed by the Indian deaf community. It has not been borrowed from any other country.
- There are a few similarities with signs from other countries, but that is natural influence. For example, the two-handed fingerspelling is similar to that of British Sign Language (BSL). There are only minor differences such as A, E, I, O, U.
- Because India was ruled by British Empire for a long time there were influences in the sign alphabets. Except the fingerspelling, the signs, words and expressions in ISL differ significantly from these in BSL.
- The English alphabet is widely used, but similar fingerspelling in other Indian languages such as Hindi, Tamil, Telegu, Gujarati etc. is not used much by deaf community.
- ISL is different from the other spoken languages in India, it has independent vocabulary and grammar.
- Now, with more and more deaf people travelling to other countries for International Conferences and more sign language video content available from other countries on social media (YouTube, Facebook etc.) – there are influences by International Signs and American Sign Language (ASL) on ISL use by deaf community. **Example:** SHOW, TEAM, FAMILY.



### INTEXT QUESTIONS 2.1

1. When was the first deaf school started in India?
2. There are variations in sign language in India. (True/False)
3. ISL is very similar to BSL (True/False)
4. The demand to use ISL to teach in schools for the deaf is very strong in India (True/False)

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### 2.4 HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

#### Sign language linguistics and research:

- Linguistics is a study of language, including the use of words, sentences and grammar.
- In the 1960s, Stokoe published research stating that American Sign Language (ASL) is a complete language with its own grammar and vocabulary. This led to the beginning of sign language linguistics and research into sign languages across different countries.
- In 1978, the researchers Vasishtha, Woodward, and Wilson conducted a study on ISL. It was seen that ISL is an independent language and evolved naturally in Indian deaf community. Later they also published the first four ISL dictionaries (Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Bangalore variety).
- In 1981 the ISL Delhi variety dictionary published by All India Federation of the Deaf (AIFD) became India's first published ISL dictionary.
- Ulrike Zeshan (1996) conducted research on the linguistic aspects of sign language varieties of India and Pakistan.
- The Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya, in Coimbatore, released an Indian Sign Language dictionary in 2001.

#### ISL Cell:

- In May 2001, the ISL Cell was started at the Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for Hearing Handicapped in Bombay (AYJNIHH) (now known as the Ali Yavar Jung National Institute of Speech and Hearing Disabilities (AYJNISHD)).
- The ISL Cell provided three levels of formal ISL training for deaf teachers and hearing interpreters, and developed videos and other learning material for these courses.
- Sibaji Panda was the first deaf teacher to teach these courses. Linguists Ulrike Zeshan and Madan Vasishtha were the consultants.
- These courses were approved by the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), which is responsible for training professionals in disability-related courses.
- The courses were also expanded to other centres belonging to the institute, in Delhi, Kolkata, Bhubaneswar, and Secunderabad.

### **Bachelor of Arts in Applied Sign Language Studies (BAASLS):**

BAASLS was a degree programme offered by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) from 2009 to 2015, in collaboration with the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) in the UK. This programme attracted deaf learners from across India as well as a large number of international learners.

The course focused on sign language linguistics, bilingual education strategies, and how to create high quality ISL learning content and materials.

### **Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre (ISLRTC):**

The ISLRTC was founded at IGNOU in 2011 with the goal of conducting research in ISL, training interpreters, and preparing teachers to use a bilingual approach with deaf learners.

The ISLRTC separated from IGNOU and became an autonomous body in 2015.

### **National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS):**

The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), which was formerly known as the National Open School (NOS) came into existence in November 1989. NIOS has strived to provide inclusive and barrier free educational opportunities to interested learners since its inception in order to achieve the vision of sustainable inclusive learning.

NIOS offers courses at the Open Basic Education, Secondary and Senior Secondary level through open and distance learning (ODL) mode. Towards facilitating education of deaf and hard of hearing learners, NIOS started developing educational resources in Indian sign language in 2016. NIOS, initially began developing an Indian sign language dictionary in order to facilitate communication and education for deaf and hard of hearing learners.

In line with the recommendation of New Education Policy (NEP2020), NIOS has taken several initiatives to promote and support the Indian Sign Language. Introduction of ISL as a language subject at secondary level subject is one of the major initiatives that have been taken by NIOS. A deaf and hard of hearing learner can choose it as a language subject at secondary level in lieu of any other language. NIOS has already developed ISL videos for different subjects at secondary and senior secondary levels in supporting educational path of deaf and hard of hearing learners. These videos are available for all on YouTube channel and web portal of NIOS. These videos are also uploaded on Diksha Portal.

NIOS makes extensive use of technology to leverage education and provide easy access to deaf and hard-of-hearing learners. In the year, 2018, on the eve of birth



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anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, Father of Nation of India, NIOS started NIOS Swayam Prabha at DTH Channel 30: Gyanamrit, which broadcast NIOS educational courses in Sign language and bilingual version at Secondary level. This channel broadcast video lectures with high-quality, visually and graphically enriched content. This is known as the first educational channels in India to broadcast educational content in the sign language 24x7. This channel was run from October 2018 to August 2020. NIOS has also made the provision of live interaction with learners and since September, 2020 and contents in sign language medium are delivered twice a week through live video programme on PM e- Vidya 10 channel.



Figure-2.1 : About NIOS

The works of NIOS has also been recognised at international level. UNESCO awarded NIOS with the prestigious ‘King Sejong Literacy Prize 2021’ for its programme ‘Enabling education of persons with disabilities through the technology-enabled inclusive learning material, with a specific focus on Indian Sign Language (ISL) based content.



**INTEXT QUESTIONS 2.2**

1. The first dictionary of ISL was published in \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The ISL Cell was started in \_\_\_\_\_ at the Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for Hearing Handicapped in Mumbai.
3. The ISLRTC as an autonomous body was established in which year?



**WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT**

- The first school for the deaf in India, the Bombay Institution for Deaf & Mutes, was founded in 1885.

- Earlier established special schools to teach the deaf did not use sign language to teach.
- Milan conference in 1880 had a huge influence in the propagation of Oral education and use of speech to teach the deaf. For more than hundred years sign languages and deaf people across the world suffered and were oppressed because of this one decision.
- Despite suppression, sign languages flourished in the hostels of deaf schools where deaf learners stayed and used sign language to communicate among themselves.
- Sign language was not taught by teachers but passed on from older deaf learners to younger deaf learners. Teachers were mostly hearing and did not know sign language.
- Deaf learners while talking to teachers and other hearing people used simpler sign language or gestures to communicate leading to misconception in hearing people's mind that sign languages are only collection of gestures with no grammar.
- Though India now has around 800 schools for the deaf but ISL is still not being used as medium of instruction in most schools. However, Mook Badhir Sangathan Indore (MBS) established in 1974 was an exception and was set up by a deaf couple and sign language was used there freely and fluently.
- Teachers in schools are still mostly hearing who are not taught ISL in their teacher training courses.
- After the year 2000, training facilities in ISL have grown rapidly.
- ISL is developed by Indian deaf people and is not borrowed from any foreign sign language. Natural influence of other sign languages like BSL (because of long British Empire in India) is there but minimal, mainly limited to finger spelling.
- ISL is an independent language, not dependent on any spoken language be it English or any regional language.
- English manual alphabets (Finger spelling) are more widely used by the Deaf in India than finger spelling of other spoken languages like Hindi, Telgu and Gujrati. Some schools that use signing systems under Total communication also use manual alphabet of regional languages.
- Because of increased access to International sign language and ASL due to conferences and social media, ISL has started to borrow few signs from other sign languages like ASL.

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