



Sign language interpreters at all Govt meetings soon

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Being ardent followers of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Shekhar Sharma and his friends, all hearing impaired youth, were glued to the TV during the recent event for the unveiling of the statue of the Indian Independence icon but could not make a word what Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in his speech.

They could, however, look forward to understanding such speeches in the days to come.

Realising the importance of sign language interpreters (SLIs) in reaching out to the hearing impaired persons like Shekhar and his friends as well speech impaired persons during such important events, the Government has asked all the Ministries and Departments to ensure arrangement of SLIs in all their meetings, seminars, workshops and conferences.

The measure, if implemented in right earnest, will not only sensitise the people towards the sector but also create jobs for the SLIs, said the activists in the sector, welcoming the move. India has around 80 million people with disabilities. According to the 2011 census, there are over 5 million people with hearing disabilities and 2 million with speech impairment in the country.

Shakuntla Gamlin, Secretary of the Persons with Disability Department under the Ministry in a letter recently drew the attention of all the Ministries to the rights of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act 2016 which came into force from April last year which recognises sign language as a means of communication with hearing and speech impairment.

She reminded the officials concerned that "As per the provision of the Act, it is incumbent upon the Government to create a barrier free environment for persons with disabilities not only in respect of built environment but also in the area of trans-



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portation, ICT eco system and other facilities and services.

"As such it is incumbent upon all the Ministries and department to take steps in this direction so that all information is available in accessible format for the use of all categories of the persons with disabilities."

Further with a view to reach out to the persons with hearing impairment it would be appropriate if sign language interpretation is made available in all Government meetings/workshops/organised by the Ministries /Department, Gamlin added.

Dr Satendra Singh, a disability rights defender, called the step as the much-needed one. "I had written to the NHRC to make SLIs mandatory in hospitals. We don't see that. Imagine a deaf patient needing emergency operation, how will the doctors take consent? It was strange that the Doordarshan did not interpret the Prime

Minister's speech at Statue of Unity launch. Diversity should be viewed as a norm and not exception."

It needs to become a culture else the initiative will fail. As we see at present, many of the circulars on DEPwD websites aren't accessible to visually impaired," Dr Singh rued.

Alok Bhuwan from Manovikas Charitable Society, echoed similar views saying that there may be some challenges such as shortage of SLIs at various locations, absence of standardisation of contextual vocabulary for ISL etc.

However, this gap can be met through deploying ICT Technology solutions such as closed captioning. The Government should also consider investing in encouraging research and innovation for localisation of such technology solutions, Bhuwan suggested.

To ensure supply of the SLIs and to promote usage of sign language in the country, the Centre on its part, in 2015, set up Indian Sign Language Research and Training centre in Delhi, a first of its kind in the country. Last year, it came out with a dictionary with over 3,000 signs, relating to words commonly used in academic, legal and medical circles.