

It has been over a year that an announcement was made to launch Indian sign language (ISL) dictionary by Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre (ISLRTC). The dictionary is yet to see the light of the day, as the team working on it is facing several challenges.

A national conference by ISLRTC, held in Delhi recently tried to finalise gestures assigned for words, which will be incorporated in the dictionary. But, a mammoth task still lies ahead.

"Like any other language, sign language too has different dialects. The language changes from region to region. If the symbol of tea is denoted by two hands where one becomes a cup and other a plate in the northern part of India, then oscillated motion of two fingers denotes the same in the western part of the country," explains A S Narayanan, member of the executive council on ISL dictionary, and president of National Association for Deaf (NAD), New Delhi.



"There is a need for consensus amongst the community for assigning gesture for each word and hence standardise the language for the hearing and speech-impaired in the country," said Narayanan, who is hearing and speech-challenged and is aware of the day-to-day challenges faced by the community.

Recorded videos of signs and their corresponding meaning were presented to around 60 speech and hearing-impaired people from across the country to take their views. The conference was attended by members of the community from various walks of life, including the executives from state-level deaf foundations, academicians, working professionals, among others.

The community members feel there should be a uniform sign language all over the country. Harish Soni, assistant professor, ISLRTC said, "Other differently-abled people can be easily identified, hence their problems can be addressed, but the challenges faced by those with speech and hearing-impairment remain hidden and hence there is lack of awareness about them."

Soni also said that the community needs to have bilingual education, including both oral (lip-movement and visual-based) and sign language-based communication. "Sign language was considered taboo at one point because of lack of awareness. We now wish to create awareness among people and want to teach the language to society at large. It's important to educate the parents and relatives of deaf and hearing-impaired children to empower them," added Soni.

To sensitise people about sign language, ISLRTC has come-up with a one-year diploma in Indian Sign Language Interpretation (DISLI) course for hearing people with the minimum education level of class XII. ISLRTC is also working on a mobile-based dictionary app which will translate signs to words and vice versa. The team is also planning to have animated characters translating announcements into sign language at public places, particularly at the railway stations, airports etc.

The national conference also came up with multiple innovative ideas such as having images along with the sign and spelling of a word, developing multi-lingual finger spellings (spelling alphabets through fingers as part of sign language) and more. Till now, 3000 words have been finalised that will be part of the ISL dictionary. All these words are widely divided into five categories- everyday words, legal words, technical words, academic words, and medical words.

The deadline for compilation and publication of the dictionary has been extended to March 2018. Soni added that they are keeping a buffer of a month or two. The delay in the launch of the dictionary is largely because of the absence of a director. Narayanan said, "We do not have a director and that has delayed the process. Sometimes it becomes difficult to get approval for some of the basic things. There is limited representation from the deaf community. We want stronger representation of the community, but there are not many qualified people in that age group.