

# **India: Breaking Language Barriers with Signs**

**A programme has been launched in an Indian University that specifically caters to educational need of the hearing impaired, imparting various skills in sign language and making them become self-reliant. The initiative has even attracted students from other countries.**

Twenty year old Sheena Kaul sits in the first row of her undergraduate class, a notebook in hand with 'Jammu and Kashmir' written over it.

Animated and ever smiling, Kaul, who hails from Kashmir, dreams of becoming a filmmaker after graduation. She wants to make films for people who can't speak or hear-the community she belongs to and feels for.

Kaul gestures with her hands and tries to say something, unsuccessfully though, as one of her instructor explain something to her in sign language. Some of her classmates try to speak without uttering a word - to tell the stories of how they have come from distant homes in search of education and success.

This is the scene from a classroom where 32 hearing-impaired students are pursuing a Bachelor of Arts programme in Applied Sign Language at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNU). While 28 students are from India, the rest are from Africa, China and Nepal.

Launched in September this year in collaboration with University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) of Britain, the programme, experts believe, is the first of its kind in the world.

The preparatory certificate course is a one-year full time programme. Students pursue six modules, focusing on English Literacy and various skills such as information technology and personal development planning.

All modules are taught and assessed through Sign language and are specifically designed to meet the needs of hearing impaired learners.

Babloo Kumar, a student from Moradabad in UP, said, “people often neglect us . After we become well educated, we can confront them with confidence and ask the government to listen to our demands - for equal opportunity in both education and employment.”

“The programme will help the hearing - impaired better their life, both socially and financially .” said PR Ramanujam, Director of IGNOU’s Staff Training and Research Institute Of Distance Education (STRIDE).

Launched by STRIDE, the course has been developed in collaboration with International Centre for Sign Language and Deaf Studies (ISLAND) at University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) in Britain.

The modules have been developed by ISLAND centre to be taught in the beginning 2009. UCLAN and IGNOU teachers will jointly conduct these courses.

Sibaji Panda, course leader and a lecturer at the UCLAN said, “The larger impact however, will be their contribution to hundreds of schools for the hearing impaired across the country.”

Panda, who himself is hearing impaired, helped design the course and arranged scholarship for 10 of the students from a Netherlands-based voluntary organisation.