

# The Noisy Silence of Deaf villagers of Dhadkai, Jammu, India: A Case Study

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## Abstract

Carlos Wallace stated that:-

*'Actions speak louder than words, silence speaks the loudest.'*

Some may believe the silence is empty and reflects a vacuum, as there are no words in it. But, sometimes this silence has a more meaningful message than the said one. It is more powerful, perceptive, and strong than a message communicated through speech. And when the silence is unheard for a longer time, it becomes noisy. It tells the story of pain, hopelessness, and hurting life experiences. A noise which communicates a lot of messages that need to be heard and acknowledged by society.

A similar kind of noisy silence can be observed in one of the villages of India named Dhadkai, which is also known as 'The Silent Village of India'. Dhadkai lies in Doda district which is 260 Kms to the north of Jammu. In this village, there are around 105 families with speech and hearing impairment and also with other disabilities. The village is home to an endogamous group of roughly 4,500 Muslim Gujjar community, a scheduled tribe of J&K which is proposed to be identified and labelled as PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) of India.

The Indian National Education Policy, 2020 clearly stated that the disparity and gaps due to gender, culture, literacy, geographical area, and economic conditions need to be bridged up. And, for this Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) must be identified and mainstreamed with the system. Not only this, but the policy is also in complete consonance with the Rights of Persons with Disability Act (RPwD), 2016 where inclusion and equal participation of people with disabilities is highlighted. Hence the researchers aimed to explore and study one of the disadvantaged groups, with a special reference to People with Disabilities. On exploring, the researchers found that there are 3 villages in India with a high prevalence of specific disability i.e. 'deafness' among the villagers. Hence, to study in detail, one of the villages was selected as a case study.

The objectives of this research were to study the current situation of Dhadkai village and explore the challenges of the deaf villagers with respect to their accessibility to education. The findings of the research revealed that with this hereditary concern, many families have been struggling hard to earn their daily living. In addition to poor economic conditions, the deaf population of this village had never been to any school in their life. Moreover, there had never been

any provision of educational and vocational training for deaf individuals. With respect to their communication skills, the deaf people of Dhadkai use local sign language and have a very limited vocabulary. The positive aspects of the findings were that this village has a good number of children and youth with deafness who can be educated and trained in various vocations. Some of them have already started learning Indian Sign Language under the Indian Army Project. Through this paper, the authors submit their suggestions and present the scope of interventions which can be made independently and in collaboration with different ministries of the Indian government like the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. The villagers have high expectations and hope from the Government of India and dream to observe development in the village for the benefit of the villagers, society, and nation.

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## Introduction

The father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, rightly said that '*India lives in villages*' and surprisingly, this statement appears to be true in the current scenario as well. Though India has seen a considerable migration from rural to urban areas for many reasons, India is still predominantly a rural nation, with approximately 70% of the people living in rural areas contributing to nearly 50% of the national income (Census, 2011). Hence, it is justified to state that equal attention must be given to the people of rural India who deserve equity and equality by all means with better living standards that includes power, plumbing for drinking water, sanitation, education, health facilities, jobs etc. However, a deeper look at the statistics related to rural India reveals the following:-

- the literacy rate of rural India is 73.5% with approximately 65% of female literacy.
- a third of rural households make less than Rs 5000 per month in income.
- half of the rural households lack land and employ primarily casual labour
- have a poverty rate of approximately 26%, compared to just 13.7% in metropolitan areas. The Rangarajan Committee's estimations show that rural poverty, which was about 31% in 2011–12, is higher than urban poverty.
- Infant Mortality Rate, percentage of the anaemic population, various Health Indices, and access to basic services are all indicators where rural India lags behind urban India (as of 2006).
- 69% of the persons with disabilities reside in rural India.

The above data communicates that the people in rural communities continue to struggle with concerns including poverty, unemployment, and a lack of essential facilities like hospitals, road connectivity and schools. Unfortunately, inequalities in living standards, quality of life, and accessibility to physical and social infrastructure in India are some signs of the growing urban-rural split. But, aspirations are visible in many facets of society, driven by quickening urbanisation and ubiquitous information access. When they are not fulfilled, it fuels anger among others who are less fortunate. Therefore, it becomes imperative to explore the present situation of the people belonging to disadvantaged groups in order to make sure that the advantages of economic prosperity are experienced by every Indian citizen.

“According to Paragraph 12.9 of the new Education Policy of India NEP (2020), children from rural areas shall obtain the necessary support for both their academic and further educational goals. Also, para 6.6 mentions that such geographic areas must be designated as "Aspirational Districts" in order to satisfy the educational needs of the people belonging to the areas where there are disproportionately greater percentages of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). In order to transform their educational environment, it is recommended that regions of the country with sizable populations from SEDGs be classified as Special Education Zones (SEZs), where all programmes and policies are executed to the fullest through additional coordinated efforts.”

On reviewing the various aspects of rural India along the lines of recommendations made by NEP (2020), the researchers intended to work in the area of challenges faced by the people of rural India with a special focus on the people belonging to SEDGs. The literature review guided the researchers that there are three villages in India with dominance and prevalence of a specific disability i.e. deafness from past so many decades. The villages are:-

- Dhadkai Village, Doda District, Jammu
- Paralkot Village, Poonch District, Jammu
- Alipur Village, Bangalore, Karnataka

And, not much research could be found pertaining to these areas. Therefore, to understand the condition in length and breadth of the villagers, one of the villages was selected as a case study. In April 2022, a survey was conducted in the Dhadkai village. The researchers used an interview schedule, an observation schedule, and discussions with locals and higher authorities to acquire the data. The result of the data analysis is discussed in the following sections.

As in this research paper, the authors are discussing a specific sample that is experiencing deafness, so it becomes imperative to understand deafness in its entirety first. Hence, a brief overview of hearing impairment and its related terms are presented:-

## An Introduction to Deafness

India has about 63 million members with Deafness and Hard of Hearing problems. According to the latest Census 2011, 2.2% of the Indian population had a disability and around 19% of disabled people are with hearing loss (Census, 2011). As per National Sample Survey (NSS)-2002, hearing disability is the 2nd topmost occurred disability with which 32% are

found to be profound and 39% with severe Hearing loss.

Population, India 2011			Disabled persons, , India 2011		
Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
121.08 Cr	62.32 Cr	58.76Cr	2.68 Cr	1.5 Cr	1.18 Cr

## Disabled Population by type of Disability in India- Census 2011

The ear is one of the most important sensitive sensory organs and any damage to this organ causes its malfunction. Due to damage, the hearing sensitivity gets affected to varying degrees of deafness. There are a few widely used terminologies that describe a person with hearing loss. Also, there lies some confusion over these terms with respect to their definitions and appropriateness of usage. To have better clarity on these terms, some of these are explained as follows:-

*Hearing Impaired:* The term "hearing impaired" is frequently used to define people with loss of hearing (any degree, mild, moderate, moderately severe, severe and profound hearing loss), counting those who have a complete absence of hearing and those who have some residual hearing.

*deaf:* "deaf" term generally denotes a person having severe hearing loss with extremely slight or no functional hearing. When the hearing sensitivity does not respond to a sound of 90 dB HL or more, it is termed deafness. This is the stage of complete loss of the ability to hear in one or both ears.

*Hard of Hearing:* "Hard of hearing" term is used to refer to people having hearing loss with enough residual hearing and this residual hearing can be enhanced by the use of auditory devices, like hearing aids or Frequency Modulation systems.

*Manual communication or Sign Language:* It is referred to as a unique language that uses certain visible indicators. These signs are more than various hand motions or manual codes created for the purpose of representing the words, thoughts, and concepts used in the communication process.

*Local or Village Sign Language:* Sign language sometimes referred to as village sign or rural sign, is an indigenous local sign language used by both hearing and deaf people in a region with a high prevalence of congenital deafness. This language typically includes signs derived from gestures used by the hearing population, so that communication can be established between hearing and non-hearing villagers.

It is observed that sometimes deafness genetically predominates in some area and is largely confined to a few families which are largely a reason for the transfer of genes and culture from one generation to the next generation.

## Review of Some Related Studies:

For the review, the researchers identified two major themes, *rural India* and *people with hearing loss*. Hence, the studies related to these themes were included in the review section.

*Rural India:* In order to better understand the nature of rural development in India, Singh, J. P. conducted a study in 2001. The results showed that the tasks and strategies implemented for rural development fell short of expectations and that there is a delay in the revitalization of rural India. As far as the academic performance of learners of rural areas is concerned, the research revealed that more than half of fifth-grade students were unable to read a text and calculate numbers equivalent to those in the second grade, according to Rajan, S. in 2019. The author recommended improving the curriculum and putting various strategies into practice in rural areas to counter the academic difficulties faced by rural students. Further to explore the problems of the rural population, in 2020, Rao C. Srinivasa found that the rural population has significant and complex social and economic problems for which decentralization and micro-level planning must be carried out. This shows that rural India still requires interventions in various dimensions.

*People with Hearing Loss:* On exploring the different communication options that are available for children with hearing impairment specifically for hard of hearing and deaf, Gravel, Judith & Galatioto, Jessica, (2003) in their study highlighted the relevance and requirement of language in the life of a child and had also focused on early assessment and intervention of the problem. The authors also mentioned the relevance of providing positive experiences to the child with deafness. With respect to the effects of hearing loss among children, in the cross-sectional investigation, Shipley et.al (2011) highlighted the increased challenges in communicative, emotional, and behavioural domains of children with hearing loss that contribute to various mental illnesses in children. Another study revealed that deaf-blind people face difficulties in communication, social interaction, and independence (Hersh M., 2013). According to the findings of the study conducted by Hersh, deaf-blind people who have trouble communicating feel alone and are less independent. Furthermore, in order to understand the difficulties faced by young children with hearing impairment in an inclusive setting in an urban area, Gudyanga, E. et al. (2014) conducted a study. According to the survey, the most difficult issue was communication problems. Due to the breakdown in communication, the children encounter dissatisfaction, rage, and exclusion. Varshney (2016) in his research article stated that 'Let's not be Deaf for the Deaf'. The article mentioned that Institutional development and team building could be the crucial factors that shall influence the early identification and rehabilitation scenario for people with deafness in the next years. Further, in the investigation of the anxiety symptoms of Australian deaf children, Long J. et al. (2021) discovered that children with varying degrees of hearing loss are more likely than hearing children to experience worry or stress that can result in mental health problems. According to the review, People with hearing loss and deafness experience a variety of obstacles in life, whether they are personal, social, cognitive, emotional, or physical. Therefore, research must be conducted periodically to examine the current situation and aid those in need.

## Objectives of the Research:

1. To understand the ecological, socio-cultural and economic factors of the target population of this research.

2. To explore the challenges faced by deaf people of Dhadkai.

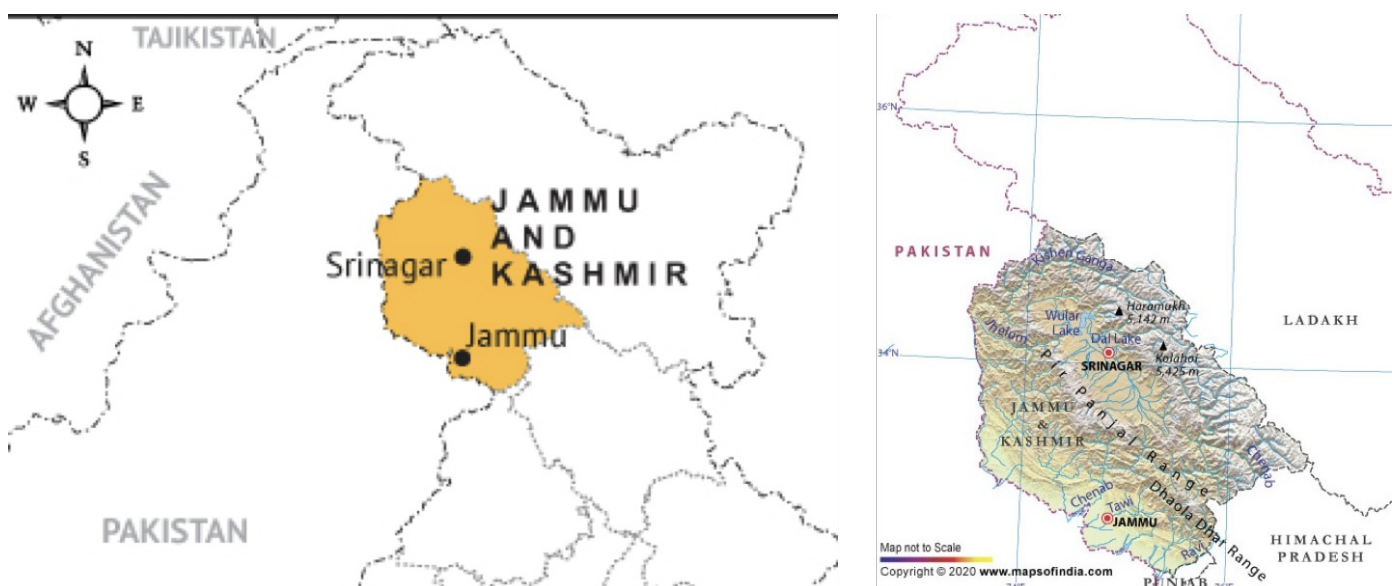
## Methodology:

This research is descriptive in nature and has a qualitative paradigm with the case study as the dominant methodology. Interview schedules and observations were made by the researchers which were analyzed qualitatively through thematic analysis. Themes were identified and reported in the findings, followed by suggestions.

## The Case: Dhadkai, Jammu & Kashmir, India

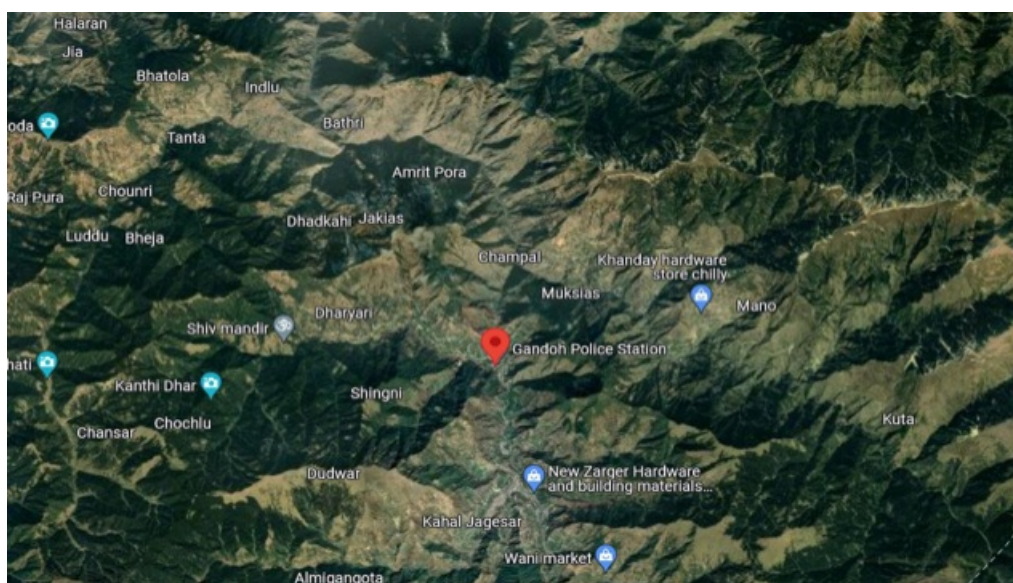
The rate with which the development is taking place in India is defiantly an eye-opening for the entire world. But keeping the development of the twenty-first century in mind, when the condition of villages of India is discussed, the status is observed to be '*not so good*'. Research and government data reveal that some villages that lie in remote areas are still devoid of essential amenities. Perhaps the worst condition of all is that of the villages that are located on the country's borders like villages of Jammu and Kashmir (<https://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/rural-kashmir-surviving-dark-age-remote-villages-deprived-basic-facilities>). The living conditions of these villages are challenging.

From the late 20th to the early 21st centuries, Jammu and Kashmir's population continued to expand rather quickly, increasing by almost one-fourth between 2001 and 2011 (Census 2011). Nearly three-fourths of the population in the region still live in towns and villages. According to a 2014 research, 40% of the population of Jammu & Kashmir speaks Kashmiri. The two main Pahadi languages, Bhadarwahi and Siraji, are spoken by the second-largest group. Others in the neighbourhood converse in Dogri and Gojri. The cultural, linguistic, and ethnic makeup of Jammu & Kashmir differs by region which also has various scheduled castes and tribes.





The village taken as a case study (Dhadkai) lies in the Doda district of Jammu division. The district consists of 18 tehsils ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doda\\_district](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doda_district)). This village falls under Gandoh (Bhalessa) Tehsil. The village is 260 km north of Jammu and 70 kms from Doda district, situated 7 km away from sub-district headquarters Gandoh. The total geographical area of the village is 284.9 hectares. Dhadkai has a total population of approximately 1,774 people, out of which the male population is 970 while the female population is 804 (census 2011). There are about 253 houses in Dhadkai village. The reported literacy rate of Dhadkai village is 33.60% out of which 47.94% of males and 16.29% of females are literate. The people of Dhadkai belong to the Gujjar community and speak Gojri. This community majorly engages in agricultural, pastoral, and nomadic activities. The village is nestled in the snowy Himalayas and is also unique for being composed of almost more than half of the population with deafness. From among two-thirds of the families that live here, nearly everyone has at least one member of the household suffering from a curious congenital disorder that leads to severe speech and hearing disabilities, rendering a large section of the community impervious to the outside world.



This village is popularly known as **the Silent village of India**. As per the version of the Sarpanch of the village Mr. Haneet, the first reported case of hearing and speech impairment in the village dates back to 1931. It was reported that in 1990, there were only 46 cases of people with deafness. In 2014, an Indian Council of Medical Research team screened 2,473 villagers and 33 children below 10 years were found suffering from hearing impairment, while 39 adults were found deaf and dumb. On average, three children are born with such a disability every year in this village. At present, there are 82 Deaf people in Dhadkai.

#### Data about the Deaf Population of Dhadkai

Deaf Adults (18 and above)	Deaf Children (0-18 years)
53 Adults	27 children



In Dhadkai, the prevalence of hearing impairment was highest among the younger age group of more than 15 years with 61% of individuals belonging to this age group. As mentioned earlier too that the people of Dhadkai communicate in Gojri and Dogri, their common language is local sign language too. Though Sign Language is being used by deaf villagers, it is also a well-known language of non-deaf villagers. And hence, good communication can be observed between the deaf and non-deaf villagers. Therefore, an appreciable social integration in the village could be observed.





Most of the people of this village have cattle rearing as the main profession and have a nomadic behaviour. Before the arrival of the winter season, for cattle grazing and animal keeping, these people move to some other place for some period (2-4 months) to take care of their animals. During the winters, due to heavy snow and cold, people generally face a lot of problems with respect to electricity, internet facility and mobility. Additionally, connectivity in terms of having pakka roads from the village to the closest large town is still in poor condition. However, work on building new roads has begun, and the village is currently accessible. The villagers also have a well-built kaccha road (cemented stairs), which is used by those who live there. Therefore, it can be said that despite being remote, Dhadkai is a reachable site.



***A man carrying his wife with multiple disabilities (locomotor and hearing) at his back to the hospital for a regular checkup***

*Deafness as Congenital Issue:* Efforts to ascertain the cause of this congenital defect were made, but unfortunately no concrete report has been published on the public platform. Otoferlin has been recognized by medical professionals as the gene in charge of the large proportion of cases of deafness. The area has the greatest prevalence of non-syndromic deaf-mutism in the world, according to Dr. Sunil Kumar Raina, who led the ICMR study team there (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/born-deaf-mute-kashmirs-silent-village-disease-has-bruised-every/>). Genetic testing revealed an autosomal recessive mutation in the population, which was responsible for the increased prevalence of cases associated with consanguineous marriages. Not only this, research on the soil, water, and air of Dhadkai was also carried out to know the reasons behind this genetic problem. Further, a genetic study was conducted on the blood samples of the villagers. The doctor revealed the no curative treatment for this deafness. However, intermarriage was found to be one of the dominant reasons for deafness and it was suggested that future generations could be saved provided villagers avoid getting married within close relations.

*Education at Dhadkai:* There are 2 government schools in Dhadkai which are till secondary level only, for the senior secondary and higher education, children are required to travel to the Bhalessa Gandoh or to the Doda district which puts them in a situation to face lots of challenges (accessibility) on the way. These two schools were upgraded in 2003 but it was reported that despite various requests sufficient staff have not been appointed in the school. Hence, the school is facing problems with respect to the shortage of staff. Moreover, there is no primary school within 10kms of Dhadkai. For higher education, the youth either have to move out of the village (which is possible for only a few of them) or leave the dream of pursuing it (which is noticed especially in the case of the females). Dhadkai does not have any education facility for deaf villagers. It is believed among the villagers that only able-bodied children can get an education, reach higher education and do well in life. Dhadkai also has a madarsa (mosque) where education is provided to the hearing children of the village.



Govt. High School of Dhadkai





*High School at Dhadkai*



*Madarsa at Dhadkai*



*Students in the class*



*Student with his Subject Book*



*Students attending the Assembly in the morning*





Students being served Mid-Day Meals in Govt. High School

## Recent Support at Dhadkai by Indian Army

With numerous social security programmes designed to give the people of Dhadkai the confidence to survive and create a living on their own, the Army has adopted this community and constantly ensured their general well-being. According to reports, the Army provided for the basic needs of the deaf villagers, including clothing, food, and healthcare, as part of the "Sadbhavna Programme." In addition, the Army has started providing door-to-door, individualised instruction for deaf children by sending out sign language specialists who have undergone special training in Secunderabad. Some deaf children were sent to Secunderabad as part of this programme for training and education, and it was claimed that these kids were able to find respectable employment after their training and education at the special school. In addition, the Army began teaching 10 kids sign language and provided them with hearing aids, each costing Rs 17,000, in the initial phase. However, it was noted that hearing aid devices could not assist the deaf because they are only useful for those who are hard of hearing, not those who have never been able to hear. For the benefit of the Dhadkai deaf community, the Army has additionally built 5 rooms close to the school that may be utilised for both schooling and other activities. The researchers noticed that the youngsters of Dhadkai have some fundamental knowledge of the Indian sign language during the survey in the interactions with the deaf kids.

## Findings:

The findings of the research are as follows:-

- **Community Rehabilitation:** The residents of Dhadkai are members of the Muslim Gujjar group, a J&K scheduled tribe that is being considered for PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) designation because they rely on low-value



economic activities like subsistence farming, logging, or dairying. According to the Tribal Research and Cultural Foundation (TRCF), this community is considered to be the most uneducated, underprivileged, and backward among scheduled tribes, demanding "particular attention and a fair deal" from the federal government and state for their elevation.

- **Academic Support to Deaf people:** The deaf youngsters of Dhadkai have not yet received any academic support from any educational or rehabilitative facility. There are about 20 to 25 deaf youngsters in the village who are in the school-age range of 6 to 18 years and are in desperate need of academic and rehabilitation support. The Sarpanch asked for some residential solutions for the deaf children while keeping in mind the geographical, seasonal, and infrastructure restrictions of the hamlet. The current Dhadkai government school is willing to collaborate with any other government or non-government organisation.
- **Need for Vocational Training:** The Dhadkai deaf villagers were found to be actively involved in farming and dairying. It may be inferred that they are devoted individuals who desire to cater to the needs of their families. The high level of occupational aspirations that were found may lead the responsible government to designate vocational training for employable youth as a special project. Interviewees who were deaf expressed a desire to learn fashion design, tailoring, and other aspects of art and beauty culture.
- **Emotional Trauma due to Deafness:** Parents of deaf children who are also deaf themselves are dealing with emotional trauma and severe anxiety disorders. In order to prevent their young children from becoming lost in the absence of hearing sense, they find it impossible to send them outside of their town or leave them unattended. Furthermore, because no one would want to adopt a child with a defective gene, their females are neither educated nor would others select them for marriage. The majority of deaf girls continued to lead solitary lifestyles due to a poisonous mix of stigma and fear of harassment, it was also claimed.
- **Need for Sign Language Training:** The local sign language, which has a relatively little vocabulary, is how the deaf villagers converse with one another. Therefore, it is necessary to provide ISL training to the deaf people of Dhadkai to improve their accessibility. Training in Indian Sign Language (ISL) is currently being provided to deaf children between the ages of 6 and 14 through door-to-door services, but it is in its early stages and needs support from various organisations.
- **Failure of Hearing Aids Assistance:** The Army offered technological support in the form of hearing aid distribution to the deaf villagers at the beginning of 2022, but because deafness is inherited, the hearing aids did not produce the desired results.
- **Disability Pension:** Although some of the deaf villagers receive disability pensions from the government, it was revealed during the interview that these pensions are insufficient for them to live comfortably in the current hard economic climate due to the high cost of living.

## Conclusion:

Many deaf children in India, a nation where deafness — and disability generally — has been underreported and mistreated — struggle to get suitable education. According to national statistics, deaf people are more common in rural

areas (Census, 2011). The impact of mental health issues in rural locations with such major issues is more severe than in metropolitan areas for the following reasons: accessibility, availability, and acceptance. Compared to those who live in more populous places, deaf people in rural areas confront a unique set of difficulties. Therefore, through this study, it is concluded that deaf people in remote locations/ rural villages are still struggling for basic necessities and human rights. The deaf people of these rural areas are devoid of basic support and services that may cater to their general and specific needs. The conclusion of this study agrees with other research studies (Varshney, S. (2016), Hersh, M. (2013), Loughran, Steven. (2013), Rao C. Srinivasa. (2020) and Singh, J. P. (2001).

## Suggestions:

- Most of the people at Dhadkai are using local sign language which has a very limited vocabulary. Hence, an Indian sign language training programme may please be arranged for the deaf people of Dhadkai as it would help in bringing them to a level where communication in the best possible manner can be established with them. There is already an Indian Sign Language Tutor who is providing door-to-door services to deaf children in Dhadkai. Hence, it is suggested that training in Indian Sign Language may be given to all deaf villagers. Already running programmes by the Indian Army may be joined/ supported by other organisations and this door-to-door sign language training should be continued for the deaf children of Dhadkai.
- Since they are nomadic, some short-term vocational courses pertaining to their interest areas like farming, animal husbandry, animal welfare, dairying, poultry farming, health management of animals, livestock marketing, horticulture, agricultural equipment operators, agri-business management etc. may be prepared, customised and translated in ISL for ready access.
- The Rehabilitation Council of India may look for the possibility to extend academic, vocational and rehabilitation support to deaf villagers.
- Awareness cum advocacy camp may be conducted by the different organisations in Dhadkai to motivate the villagers to enrol their children and adults with the institution for academic and vocational skill development.
- Further, as the National Institute of Open School has academic content available in Indian Sign language, it is suggested that other than the regular functional academic facilities for the villagers, the organisation may intervene to offer OBE, secondary and senior secondary content to the deaf and non-deaf learners through distance mode. The schools in the village may be contacted and a study centre may be opened in the village with all the academic resources and support made available to the target population. Also, personalised/ modified Indian Sign Language academic content may be prepared, compiled and provided to the deaf villagers for easy access.
- Since Army has adopted the village and technological support had already been extended to the villagers, academic support may be extended to the villagers in collaboration with the Army for its effective implementation.
- Fund generation for this project may be done by collaborating with different ministries. Since this is a tribal community (Gujjar Community that comes under the PVTG list) and a nomadic, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment may be contacted for the upliftment and educational support of the target population.
- The researcher observed a moderately negative attitude of teachers of high school Dhadkai towards the inclusion of

deaf children in the same school. Hence, some in-service training capsules may be prepared and carried out in Dhadkai to change the attitude of teachers towards the inclusion of children with disability in regular schools.

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