

Identifying the Challenges Faced by Deaf and Hard of Hearing Tamil Individuals in Sri Lanka: A Study on Sign Language Barriers

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the communication challenges faced by Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) Tamil individuals in Sri Lanka, with a specific focus on sign language-related barriers and the lack of a standardised Tamil Sign Language (TSL). It investigates how these linguistic challenges affect access to education, healthcare, employment, and social integration. A qualitative, phenomenological research design was employed to capture the lived experiences of Tamil-speaking DHH individuals. Data were collected through focus group discussions and community meetings using purposive and snowball sampling methods. All discussions were facilitated in Tamil Sign Language and through interpreters fluent in both Tamil and TSL. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring challenges and experiences shared by participants. The study highlights the challenges faced by Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Tamil individuals in Sri Lanka, particularly in accessing sign language. Key themes include communication barriers, education and social integration, employment challenges, and the role of sign language. The lack of awareness about deafness, insufficient resources, and exclusion in schools contribute to stigma. Employment issues stem from communication difficulties and workplace accommodations. The role of Tamil Sign Language is crucial for identity and empowerment, but limited recognition and resources pose challenges. While the study includes Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) participants from all districts of Sri Lanka, it is limited to Tamil-speaking individuals and does not represent the experiences of Sinhala or other language communities. Additionally, potential nuances may have been lost during sign language interpretation, affecting the full expression of participants' lived experiences. This research highlights the urgent need for the development and recognition of Tamil Sign Language, policy support for inclusive education, and culturally sensitive service provision. It provides a foundation for future advocacy and policy-making aimed at linguistic equity and social inclusion for DHH Tamil individuals.

Key Words: Deaf Tamil individuals, Tamil Sign Language (TSL), communication barriers, inclusion, Sri Lanka, sign language rights, phenomenological study.