Introduction

As a multilingual and multi-ethnic country, India has a long tradition of translation and interpretation spanning several centuries. Over the ages, the Indian subcontinent had substantive relations with many countries and regions encompassing trade, diplomatic, scholarly and spiritual interactions. India also has an extended history of foreign rule and colonisation. So it is unsurprising that language intermediaries played an important role; there are several references to the historical and even mythological presence of such intermediaries in relevant literature (Adams 2020; Khubchandani 2002; Sema 1985).

The early historical emergence of interpreters, while undoubtedly fascinating, is not the remit of this chapter, which will focus on the development of language interpreting in independent India post 1947, and specifically the period during which conference interpretation took formal shape. Given the paucity of recorded data in this field, both historical and contemporary, the methodology adopted involved consulting available literature, conducting a survey of interpreters, interviewing interpreters and conference organisers who were closely associated with the development of interpreting as a profession in the country, and drawing on the authors’ own extensive experience of conference interpreting and interpreter training in India. The chapter seeks to trace the contours of the interpreting profession in the country, engaging with its specific features, languages, working conditions as well as the training of Indian interpreters, while also briefly contextualising the country’s linguistic diversity. It further endeavours to provide an overview of sign language interpreting in the Indian context and concludes with an outlook on the future.

India's linguistic diversity

There are various estimates of how many languages and dialects are spoken in India. Of these, the Indian census recognises 121 as major language groups spoken by at least 10,000 or more people (Census of India 2011b: 6). This linguistic diversity is enshrined in the Indian Constitution, which lists 22 languages in its Eighth Schedule. Following the linguistic reorganisation of the Indian states between 1956 and 1966, many of these ‘scheduled languages’ serve...
as the official language of a state and are thus privileged as languages for the purposes of education, administration and parliamentary debates.

**Official language policy**

India does not have a national language; the Constitution designated Hindi in Devanagari script as the official language of the Union. However, it also provided for the continued use of the English language “for all the official purposes of the Union” initially for a period of 15 years (i.e. till January 1965), which parliament was empowered to extend (Articles 343 (1), (2)). Consequently, English came to be the associate official language and has to date not been phased out. Indeed, Article 348 stipulates that the authoritative texts of the Supreme Court and High Courts, judgements, decrees, bills, acts of parliament, orders, rules, regulations and byelaws shall all continue to be in English (The Constitution of India 1950: 212–215).

Translation into and out of the official languages, both at the federal and state level, has in many cases been made mandatory, particularly with a view to promoting Hindi, but this does not apply to interpreting. Interpretation is provided at some—usually high profile—events such as the annual conference of governors and the chief ministers’ conference (also because of state sensitivities regarding language), although it is not mandated and the languages covered, apart from Hindi and English, vary. Interpreting is not provided at government meetings or media briefings (the COVID pandemic briefings being a recent example) or e.g. for speeches of the prime minister to the nation, except perhaps increasingly into sign language. One notable exception to the above is the Indian parliament, discussed further below.

**Indian Sign Language (ISL)**

ISL is a pan-Indian, indigenous sign language that is part of the Indo-Pakistan Sign Language family used by deaf communities on the subcontinent (Zeshan 2000). ISL dialects may demonstrate some regional lexical variations but they share a common grammar (Strazny 2005: 524). There is presently a proposal to include ISL as the 23rd language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The size of the deaf community in India is among the largest in the world, although no definitive figures are available. Estimates range from 5 million to 18 million (Hajee 2014; Social Statistics Division, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2017: 75).

**Interpreting in the intra-Indian context**

It might be reasonable to assume that the multilingualism prevalent in India would be a contributive factor in generating demand for interpretation. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into the detailed reasons why this is not the case, yet a brief explanation may be in order.

Both Hindi and English operate as lingua francas in India. Although only a small number, i.e. about 260,000 Indians recognise English as their mother tongue (Census of India 2011a: 10), it is the second-most widely spoken language in India after Hindi when including those who speak English as their second and third language (Census of India 2011b; Rukmini 2019). Among the educated and privileged sections, the medium of education is usually English, and indeed all social classes in India aspire to access English education, which is seen to enhance employability, opportunity and prestige. Additionally, a vast number of Indians speak more than one language (Census of India 2011b)—20 per cent are bilingual while 7 per cent know three or more languages (Kawoosa 2018)—and can communicate with speakers of other
languages to a greater or lesser degree. Interpretation is thus usually not needed (nor is it mandatory) in official or business settings with only Indian participants (e.g. business meetings), where interactions are usually in English or a mix of English and other Indian languages. In situations where participants have no common language some ‘informal’ interpreting may take place to facilitate basic understanding. There is a lack of awareness about professional interpreting and a reluctance or inability to pay for this service. As an example, on the rare occasions that speeches made in Hindi or English at political rallies are actually interpreted, these are usually rendered into the local language by party members to the best of their ability rather than by professional interpreters (Scroll Staff 2019; Swarajya Staff 2019).

The authors received no report of direct interpretation from one Indian language into another (except into English or Hindi), allowing the inference that this is indeed exceedingly rare in conference interpreting settings.

**Interpreting in Parliament**

Simultaneous interpretation, initially only in English and Hindi, has been provided in Parliament since 1964. It was subsequently extended first to 14 and then in July 2018 to all 22 scheduled languages (Das 2019). Article 120 (The Constitution of India 1950: 60) permits the use of mother tongue in Parliament if the member is not fluent in English or Hindi.

The entire proceedings of both houses—the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha—are simultaneously interpreted from and into Hindi and English. Members must give advance notice if they wish to speak in a regional language (Lok Sabha Secretariat 2019: 3–5), and their speeches are interpreted into English and Hindi but not vice versa. In practice, many languages are seldom used, if at all, as corroborated by PDT Achary, former Secretary General of the Lok Sabha:

> Some MPs, who are not well-versed in English or Hindi, choose not to speak at all. Others think they are not being taken seriously because they speak a regional language. More or less, speaking in English has become a benchmark of sorts in Parliament.

There are in any case not enough booths to accommodate all languages, with either two or three booths in any venue. Copies of statements and speeches are given in advance to the interpreters (Lok Sabha Secretariat 2019: 5), who largely read out the translations. “But it is the supplementaries which put [them] to test … The Interpreter has to decide instantaneously whether to finish the sentence in the mouth or to start translation of the answer” (Interpreters Branch n.d.).

Interpreting in Parliament has been insular in its approach: it neither contributed to the development of conference interpreting in the country nor did it drive awareness or demand for trained interpreters, with interpretation into and between Indian languages continuing to be negligible. Historically, conference interpreting in India evolved from interpretation between foreign languages and English, with Hindi gaining ground in recent years.

**Conference interpreting in India: the early years**

Interpreting in post-independence India began in the sphere of foreign relations. Eager to establish itself on the world stage, the young republic hosted a series of international, multilingual conferences in Delhi from 1947 onwards. Archival footage reveals that several conferences took place in the Parliament, possibly using consecutive and whispering interpretation since there is no evidence of simultaneous interpreting facilities. The languages actively in use at
the time were French, Spanish, Arabic and Chinese, reflecting the significance of the regions where these were spoken for Indian foreign policy, being also UN languages (see Ruiz Rosendo & Diur, Chapter 9, in this volume). The first three, moreover, were languages of member states of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). As an interesting aside, at some of the first conferences with simultaneous interpretation there was a separate booth for shadowing to facilitate comprehension of various shades of English on the floor. The other languages were often relayed from this booth.

Conference interpreting in India accelerated with the emergence in the 1960s of the NAM and G-77. The government constructed the Vigyan Bhavan convention centre in Delhi in 1956, which offered high-quality interpretation facilities for 8 to 12 languages in several halls. It served as the venue for many “historically noteworthy conferences and summits, such as CHOGM, NAM and the Seven-Nation Summit, attended by distinguished world leaders and dignitaries” (Samarthyam, National Centre for Accessible Environments 2009: 2). Alongside, ancillary infrastructure was developed and some hotels, such as the Ashoka Hotel and later the Taj Palace Hotel in Delhi, installed permanent booths in their convention halls. Other venues, such as the India International Centre and the FICCI auditorium in Delhi, also had provision for permanent booths.

This flurry of conference activity gave exposure to the nascent talent pool for interpreting available in India. Initially, conference services, including interpreting and translating, were organised by providers based abroad. Then, at the conference of the Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool in New Delhi in 1976, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) decided to try out Indians in a smaller role as translators (though not at the same rates as their foreign colleagues) after first putting them through a test. The 1983 NAM summit provided the breakthrough via conference back-end and translation services. Many of the Indian translators and those on the documentation team later evolved into interpreters in their own right. Indian diplomat T.P. Sreenivasan, in charge of organising the NAM ministerial conference in Delhi in April 1986, remarked in his memoirs:

> Conference services as usual were provided by the redoubtable Mary Penny from Geneva, a veteran of many non-aligned conferences … We did hire some interpreters locally, but Mary Penny resented it and did not give them responsibilities commensurate with their qualifications.

(Sreenivasan 2008: 65)

While interpreters for big conferences continued to be flown in by the UN or from Geneva, Indian interpreters started being used for smaller international events. Having proved their ability and competence, local interpreters were gradually able to consolidate their position. Moreover, hiring Indian interpreters was more economical than flying in interpreters from abroad.

In 1982, the MEA set up a conference cell “to look after the logistical arrangements to be made for organising international conferences/meetings” (MEA n. d.: annual report 1982–83). The cell was initially very active and this gave a fillip to the conference scene—and interpreting—in India. In the following years, many international conferences of industry associations and scientific bodies in areas such as banking, forging, homeopathy, law, mining, publishing, soil etc. took place, usually in Delhi owing to the infrastructure available.

Thus, from the 1980s onwards, local Indians were regularly hired as interpreters although there continued to be a mix of Indian and foreign interpreters at most conferences. Some foreign interpreters were living in India at the time and “were highly qualified while others, like
most of the Indians, were self-trained”. The Indian interpreters were linguistically competent, with a wide exposure to and familiarity with the politics and current affairs of the day. In addition, some diplomats occasionally doubled up as interpreters, as did some personnel of the All-India Radio.

At various times between 1980 and 2000 there were up to four members of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) living in India. But with conference interpreting assignments declining towards the mid-1990s, some of these interpreters shifted their professional domiciles elsewhere and their number gradually dwindled to just the one AIIC interpreter from India at that time, Professor Anuradha Kunte (who was an AIIC member from 1983–2008).

Parallel to local Indian interpreters, Indian professional conference organisers (PCOs) also emerged and began taking over the entire organisation of conferences, providing a gamut of services from secretarial staff, documentation teams, translators, revisers and interpreters. Interestingly, the early PCOs, such as Activos and CAS, were run by interpreters.

**The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)**

In the early years, before it created an interpreter cadre, the government of India used the services of either career diplomats or linguists, for instance, there are several references in relevant literature to Nehru’s Chinese interpreter, V. Paranjpe (Chung 2015: 226; Nayar 2016; PRC Foreign Ministry Archives 1954). In the 1960s, an interpreter cell was set up to provide translation and consecutive interpreting for Arabic, French, German, Persian and Russian (Chander 2017). Efforts to integrate interpreters in the ministry’s staff structure culminated in the formation of the present interpreter cadre between 1982 and 1985. It employs 35 interpreters, of whom 9 are posted at ministry headquarters and the remaining 26 at missions abroad (MEA n.d.: annual report 2019–20). Seven languages are covered: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Persian, Russian and Spanish.

The ministry follows a dual approach: MEA interpreters take on jobs in addition to interpreting, with a few even having become ambassadors (Hindustan Times 2018; Kasturi 2015); and selected diplomats are now sent to interpreting schools for training (MEA n.d.: annual report 2019–20: 337, 341). This approach has been criticised by the Standing Committee on External Affairs (2016: 50) “as it compromises the actual performance of our officers as well as the job of interpretation”.

MEA interpreters work consecutively at bilateral meetings with foreign languages in conjunction with English and increasingly also Hindi, which was earlier not the case (Mohan 2014). Hindi was first used internationally in 1977 with the speech delivered by the then external affairs minister (and later prime minister) Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the 32nd UN General Assembly. The practice was—and to an extent still is—to provide a written English translation of the speech, which would be read out by the ‘interpreter’ (as documented in several journalistic articles, e.g. Haider 2020, and witnessed by colleagues). External interpreters are usually hired when simultaneous interpreting is required.

**Training**

By the end of the 1970s, many aspiring interpreters had the benefit of training at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi. The JNU’s Centre of French Studies at one time boasted three AIIC members as faculty for their interpreting programme. In the early years, interpreting into and out of European languages was more common than for East Asian languages. Thus,
while interpreting courses in Russian, French and German were introduced in the mid-1970s and in Spanish in the 1980s, Japanese, Chinese and finally Korean started only in the 1990s. There was—and is—almost no interpreting taught using Indian languages other than English.

Courses on consecutive and simultaneous interpreting are offered at the postgraduate level at the JNU, which continues to be the only institution in India where such courses are systematically conducted and which has adequate infrastructure, namely, simultaneous booths with relay facility, multi-media and audio-visual rooms. Interpretation courses are into and out of English with the exception of the Japanese Centre, which offers the language pair Japanese-Hindi as well. Currently, an MA degree with specialisation in translation and interpretation is awarded by the French, German and Japanese Centres. The programmes and courses, decentralised across individual language Centres, are full-time courses imparting skills for professional interpreting.

Short-duration interpretation courses for some languages are also offered by a few other universities and cultural institutes, e.g. in Delhi, Hyderabad and Pune, but given their duration ranging from a few months to two semesters and lack of simultaneous interpreting infrastructure, these are essentially for liaison interpreting (see Tiselius, Chapter 4, in this volume).

The qualifications required for staff interpreters in government emphasise formal language degrees rather than certification of interpreting skills (Gazette of India 2020; Lok Sabha 2020). In parliament, inducted candidates undergo some brief, albeit unstructured training in-house, however, are generally expected to learn on the job. MEA interpreters are supposed to be “sent for a higher level interpretational course for up to six months in one of the premier language centres” (Government of India MEA Training Framework 2013).

The Indian government recently launched a New Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which states that “India will … urgently expand its translation and interpretation efforts” (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2020: 55). It proposes the establishment of an Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation (IITI), with the objective also to promote all Indian languages. This is an encouraging development, though yet to be implemented. An enabling environment will also be needed to generate the demand and market for conference interpreters in Indian languages. The concluding outlook provides some recommendations in this regard.

Training in Sign Language Interpreting (SLI)

A two-year diploma course in ISL interpreting (DISLI) is conducted under the aegis of the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) (Rehabilitation Council of India n.d.). Admission to the course requires a secondary school qualification and is through an all-India online aptitude test comprising multiple choice questions (on English, local reasoning, general awareness and numerical ability). Prior knowledge of ISL is not a prerequisite. DISLI graduates must pass a theoretical and practical examination (with greater weightage given to the practical exam). They are then certified as ISL interpreters by the RCI, which maintains a register of all qualified professionals. As of March 2020, there are seven RCI-accredited institutes across India offering the DISLI course, each with an annual intake of approximately 20–25 students.

Survey of the interpreting landscape in India

Virtually no empirical data exists on conference interpreting in India. The authors therefore conducted an extensive survey of interpreters in the country covering a wide range of questions. The survey used a Google Forms questionnaire and was conducted from 15 December 2019 to 15 March 2020.
Survey methodology

The survey was exploratory in nature, incorporating a mix of open and closed-ended questions. Disclosure of identity was voluntary. The questionnaire employed filter questions and a cascade format. Not all questions were compulsory. Closed-ended questions comprised both yes/no questions, mostly also with the option of providing an additional comment, and multiple-choice questions (MCQs). Most of the MCQs had an option for respondents to articulate a response not on the list. Scaled questions were used occasionally.

The questionnaire comprising a total of 177 questions was divided broadly into four sections designed specifically for consecutive and simultaneous interpreters; staff and in-house interpreters; interpreter trainers; and sign language interpreters. The questions ranged from qualifications, training, working conditions and duties, professional associations and continuing professional development to market situation, developments and trends.

The raw data was scrutinised and analysed, and the distilled findings have been presented in the relevant sections.

Survey respondents and recruitment

Since there is no proper database of interpreters or of interpreter training institutions in India, the authors contacted interpreters whom they were professionally aware of over the years, who in turn provided names of further interpreters known to them and so on. The community of conference interpreters in India continues to be fairly small and the authors sought to reach out to all known interpreters. The survey addressed 74 interpreters in total and received 44 responses (of which two responses had to be discarded), i.e. a response rate of 59.45 per cent. It covered freelance interpreters, staff interpreters of the Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian parliament, in-house interpreters in companies, sign language interpreters as well as interpreter trainers. The identified respondents received an email with an introduction to the survey and link to the online questionnaire, as well as subsequent follow-up emails and phone calls where necessary. In addition, select interpreters and conference organisers were interviewed, and meetings or phone interviews were conducted with government officials and agencies.

Most of the surveyed interpreters work with both interpreting modes, simultaneous and consecutive. It is difficult to put a figure to the total number of practising conference interpreters in the country in the absence of any reliable statistics. However, extrapolating from a question put to survey respondents about the number of interpreters they knew in their language pairs and in other languages, a tentative figure of less than 100 can be assumed. If the total number of in-house and sign language interpreters in the country is also factored in it will, of course, drive this number up, but this may not be relevant from a conference interpreting perspective.

Key survey results

The majority of the surveyed interpreters have been working for over 10 years, constituting close to 80 per cent of respondents to the survey, while 40 per cent have worked for over 30 years (Figure 16.1). In fact, some of the interpreters who worked at the early conferences in the 1970s and 1980s are still active.

Languages with a larger number of interpreters having worked for less than 10 years include Korean and Japanese. These findings would lend support to the conclusions that language trends are changing (discussed further below).
Training

In response to questions on training (Have you undergone interpreter training? If yes, which course/university/ institute did you attend? Would you say the training was good, adequate, poor, other?), the survey revealed (Figure 16.2) that there is an almost equal number of spoken language interpreters who have received training (of varying duration) and those who learned on the job (see also survey results for SLI below).

Almost 20 per cent have also trained abroad. Regarding quality of training, 32 per cent felt their training was good, 28 per cent said it was adequate, 28 per cent selected poor, while the remaining respondents either stated that training was “patchy” or had not attended an interpretation course.

Training in all languages is bidirectional, there is no training with a C language. Courses are thematically structured mainly according to topicality, “relevance for the market and government”, and popular topics dealt with at international conferences. Korean interpretation courses also cover the cosmetics industry.
In at least half the courses sampled, no criteria are applied for admitting students, who are often (in university courses) continuing students of a BA programme and may automatically opt for the interpretation course. In some cases, admission is based on grades, while in others language competence, analytical ability and general awareness are tested.

Little research of note has emerged and there have only been two PhDs\textsuperscript{21} and a few MPhils in the field of interpretation.

**Employment, experience, market and working conditions**

66.7 per cent of respondents indicated having another job besides interpretation. As a reason, 55.6 per cent of these selected the option “Have a primary job and interpret on the side”, 22.2 per cent felt there were insufficient interpretation jobs to keep them occupied, 16.7 per cent stated they were unable to earn sufficiently through interpreting alone, while the remaining respondents either desired the security of a permanent job or stated that interpreting was not their main area of interest/activity. Less than 30 per cent of interpreters responded that they work freelance full-time; of these, half indicated also doing translation.

In response to the question, “Approximately how many days do you interpret in a year?” about 65 per cent of interpreters work less than 30 days a year, with 31.25 per cent working between 1 and 10 days (see Figure 16. 3), although in some languages, notably Japanese, the number of workdays is significantly higher (see Figure 16.6).

To a question on how they sourced work, respondents were equally divided between direct clients and agencies.

There is no standard working day, however the norm appears to be 8 hours, with 62.5 per cent of respondents indicating this. Other responses ranged from 5-6 hours to 8–12 hours.

One-third of the respondents usually sign contracts. Those who do, reported that contract clauses covered payment and other terms, such as work hours, cancellation, overtime, travel

![Figure 16.3 Number of days worked per year](image-url)
expenses, accommodation etc. Two respondents mentioned confidentiality/non-disclosure agreements.

The range of professional fees for most language pairs is extremely wide, with a little variation also between simultaneous and consecutive rates. Overall, fees for consecutive showed a tendency to be somewhat lower. In some languages, notably Hindi, German and Japanese, the differential in fees charged by interpreters was exceptionally large (about 90 per cent), although in almost all languages the difference between the lowest and highest rates ranged between 40 per cent to 80 per cent.

Main languages, language pairs and types of interpreting

The main languages out of and into which there is interpretation are Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, ISL, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Spanish. All languages enumerated here are primarily interpreted in conjunction with English and to a lesser extent Hindi. About 50 per cent of interpreters gave English as their A language, followed by Hindi; 35 per cent of interpreters have two A languages (Figure 16.4).

No respondent mentioned interpreting between any Indian languages besides Hindi and English, however, in all the foreign languages surveyed, except for Portuguese, at least one interpreter or more, is now working into and out of Hindi as well (Figure 16.5). A few respondents also mentioned working with English and other Indian languages: Bengali (2), Marathi (1), Telugu (1), Punjabi and Urdu (1). The domains where interpreting between Indian and foreign languages is used ranged from the “highest level of government”, trade unions and NGOs to field visits. Two respondents also mentioned conferences.

Going by the number of workdays in a year, it would appear that Japanese<>English/Hindi is the most dominant language pair with more than 100 days of work on average, followed by French and Korean (Figure 16.6).

Opinion among interpreters was divided equally about whether English as the international lingua franca (see Albl-Mikasa, Chapter 39, in this volume) has adversely impacted interpretation opportunities or not, while about a quarter of survey respondents was unsure about this. Views expressed ranged from, “It has reduced the instances where interpreting is required and

Figure 16.4  Distribution of A languages

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fostered acceptance of poor spoken English” to “There hasn’t been much impact of English as lingua franca on interpretation in the case of East Asian languages”.

Almost all respondents work with consecutive, just two stated that they interpret only simultaneously. On the other hand, seven respondents work exclusively with consecutive. In contrast to global trends, Indian interpreters are more or less equally divided in their preference for the simultaneous or consecutive mode (see Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume), with about one-third stating they had no preference.
Professional association, trends and issues specific to India

Almost all (94.5 per cent) of the surveyed spoken language interpreters are neither members of nor aware of any professional body for interpreters in India. Those who were aware of any association mentioned only AIIC (see Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in this volume). Presently, there is just one AIIC member domiciled in India. About 76 per cent of interpreters who responded to the survey are based in Delhi, and of these 80 per cent reported travelling within India on professional assignments. The remaining respondents are located in Mumbai, Bangalore, Goa, Hyderabad, Chennai, Bhopal and Ranchi. About 43 per cent of Indian interpreters reported working internationally as well.

There was a wide range of (sometimes contradictory) views on market trends and how these have impacted the profession in India. Only 26 respondents answered this open-ended question. Broadly, there were two common themes: market size and market quality. The decline in work volumes was highlighted by seven respondents, e.g. there are “very few multilingual conferences now as compared to 1980–90s”. On the other hand, two respondents noted greater demand and more work with the influx of Korean companies. In terms of market quality, e.g. professionalism and awareness (both among interpreters and clients), four respondents stated that the market was now more professional in terms of better equipment, better facilities or better awareness, while two respondents felt standards had declined: “the number of people in a booth used to be four, it came down to three and now it is two and even one”. Six respondents commented that there was now more competition, and undercutting and that recruitment, which was earlier on the basis of “people who could interpret” is now “on the basis of rates and connections”. One respondent wrote that the role of consultants (agencies) had drastically increased and that to maintain their margins “work is being assigned to inexperienced interpreters”. Two respondents felt there had been no change in the market. These trends are discussed further in the analysis below.

In response to an open-ended question on issues specific to India with regard to interpreting, over half the respondents commented on the need for proper/specialised training and continuous professional development courses. About one-third highlighted under-valuation, low awareness and the lack of prestige attached to the profession (see Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in this volume). Other responses related the “chaotic”, “anarchic” and disorganised nature of the market, unsatisfactory working conditions, absence of organised professional bodies, low rates and lack of job security.

Survey results for SLI

The number of respondents was comparatively small, consequently another survey of ISL practitioners was also consulted to obtain a more rounded picture (Rao 2010). Nevertheless, given that the sign language landscape in the country is rapidly evolving, the findings below may not be entirely representative.

Respondents were contacted through members of the Indian SL associations. All respondents to the survey had a DISLI certification.

Training was largely judged to be excellent and all surveyed SL interpreters reported attending continuing education programmes. About half were also familiar with American Sign Language (ASL).

Some 80 per cent of respondents had worked for less than 10 years. This is higher than in an older survey (Rao 2010) where the figure is in the range of 66 per cent, but it largely corroborates the trend of there being more young interpreters (between the ages of 18-34).
Some 85 per cent of the responding SLIs work full-time as interpreters, some with permanent jobs. Workdays averaged 240 per year; work hours ranged between 4 to 8 hours a day. The reported remuneration, on the other hand, is quite low, with not much of a rate differential (certainly much less than for spoken language interpreters). It is rare for SL interpreters to sign contracts.

All responding SL interpreters travel within India on assignments, 14 per cent also work internationally.

The maximum number of SL interpreters in India so far interpret with ISL and Hindi, followed by English, and a smaller number of interpreters with other Indian languages. The domains are primarily the education and disability sectors, vocational training, health, courts, police, private/multinational companies and conferences. Television and video interpreting are not very significant.

In contrast to spoken language interpreters, all the surveyed SL interpreters were members of one or both of the two Indian SLI associations: the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI) and the Indian Sign Language Interpreters Association (ISLIA).

SL interpreters lamented the persistence of low awareness and recognition, lack of job stability and low incomes, while also highlighting the need for better ethics and rules.

**Analysis**

As is clear from the historical overview, conference interpreting in post-independence India has formally existed for over 50 years. Yet it has so far not emerged as an organised sector in terms of standards or industry representation, which in turn has a spillover effect on perceptions of the profession, training, hiring, working conditions and income opportunities.

The findings of the questionnaire would lend support to the conclusion that language trends are changing and that the comparative demand for East Asian languages and Hindi is on the rise, though not necessarily for conference interpreting alone. The data on years worked (Figure 16.1) indicates that more young interpreters are gravitating towards East Asian languages. In the corporate sector there is enormous demand for Japanese and Korean in-house interpreters, with graduates from interpreting courses being absorbed by companies in large numbers.

In comparison, the number of working days has declined for European languages, drastically so for languages like French and German. From the data generated through the survey, interviews and the authors’ own experiences, it emerges that there were several multi-language political, industry and scientific conferences, usually lasting several days, which required interpretation from the early 1980s to the mid/late 1990s. These have, for the most part, given way to shorter bilingual conferences and bilateral meetings, or conferences held only in English.

The number of new entrants to the profession (with under 10 years’ experience) is comparatively low—which also has implications for the future. The authors believe that while the lack of adequate training facilities and trainers is a constraint for the emergence of young interpreters, the paucity of work opportunities is also making conference interpreting unattractive as a career, and most interpreters have another job.

At one level, and as evidenced by the findings on workdays, rates and contracts, this also results in a lack of professionalism where quality, experience and training are not valued and there is no uniformity in working conditions. Amongst interpreters themselves—be it within the same language or across languages—there appears to be little solidarity in terms of agreeing on and upholding basic principles and ethics. The range of rates for most language pairs is extremely—perhaps unacceptably—wide.
The PCO services that were earlier interpreter-led have, to a large extent, been replaced by equipment providers and event management agencies. This and other factors highlighted by survey respondents (low awareness, lack of professionalism and the profit motive) have resulted in interpreting being viewed more as a commodity than the specialised service it is. Standards have declined in many areas. The English booth of yore has become obsolete in keeping with global private market trends; bilingual booths are now the norm. Permanent booths are a rarity, even venues where they existed have removed them. While some survey respondents felt that the technology, sound quality and booths have improved over the years, cost-cutting often results in the mobile booths used at conferences not complying with ISO specifications.

The situation is further compounded by the absence of any professional association to support and protect the interests of conference interpreters in India, a reflection also of the disorganised nature of the industry. Although SLI emerged more recently, sign language interpreters have two national associations to represent them.

Since Delhi is the capital and major meeting hub of the country with training and other facilities thus far concentrated here, an overwhelming number of conference interpreters are based in and around the city. The fact that 80 per cent of Delhi-based interpreters travel within the country on assignments also points to a shortage of conference interpreters elsewhere and to the market for interpreting in other Indian cities (e.g. Pune, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Mumbai) remaining largely untapped (see also concluding outlook). Moreover, in the absence of a professional association, there is no readily accessible directory of interpreters that clients can reference.

The number of interpreters travelling abroad to work is indicative both of low work volumes overall and the dearth of professionally remunerated assignments in the country. Indian interpreters have been part of interpretation teams at UN and other international conferences held largely, but not only, in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The authors have observed that while this was initially with a foreign language and English combination, over the last six years or so the language combinations have increasingly included Hindi as well. However, there are insufficient such opportunities to sustain freelance interpreters.

In the Indian context, it is unsurprising that almost half the interpreters surveyed have English as their A language. Some 35 per cent have two A languages—although this has yet to translate into a market for these languages. Notwithstanding a discernible increase in demand for Hindi (into and out of English and foreign languages), there are almost no industry conferences with Hindi. It therefore remains to be seen how sustainable this market is for conference interpreting.

Consecutive interpreting has a larger share of the market, as corroborated by the survey. The economic and business domains dominate for Spanish and particularly for the East Asian languages, while consecutive in other languages is used mostly at bilateral/multilateral government meetings. Simultaneous interpreting is used primarily for conferences of industry associations and scientific bodies but also in political settings.

The training of interpreters in India is beset by many shortcomings: the dearth of institutes reflects both lack of awareness and the lack of importance attached to this profession. Inadequate infrastructure and maintenance of existing facilities are a further problem. There are usually no criteria for admission to interpreting programmes and there is a paucity of professional, experienced and practising interpreters as trainers. Almost no knowledge sharing takes place between different universities and institutes. Unsurprisingly, few students go on to become professional interpreters.
Overall, the picture that emerges is somewhat gloomy. There are encouraging trends in some languages but the absence of quality training facilities and standards is a huge dampener.

**SLI trends**

There are currently about 300 certified ISL interpreters in the country and by some estimates approximately 800 non-certified interpreters (Nagpal 2019). Both figures appear woefully inadequate as there is a felt need for 8,500 SL interpreters (Rangasayee 2009).

India ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007, following which a new piece of legislation, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), was passed. Although the Act does not specifically mention signing, it requires, for example, that education and the electronic media be made accessible to the disabled. In 2018, an official circular asked for SLI to be provided at all government meetings, seminars and workshops (Dutta 2018), but there is no information on whether this has actually been implemented. In September 2019, the phased implementation of accessibility standards for television programmes for persons with hearing impairment was announced. News channels are now supposed to carry a news bulletin with sign language interpretation at least once a day (Jha 2019).

SLI in formal settings is yet to fully establish itself in the country but given the trends above, it has the potential to become a growth sector for conference interpreting in India (see also Turner, Grbić, Stone, Tester & de Wit, Chapter 38, in this volume). Its development will need to be carefully nurtured.

**Conclusion and outlook**

A study of the developments in conference interpreting in India over the last seven decades allows for some conclusions. The profession, which appeared to be on a growth trajectory during its early years, has not lived up to the promise. Stagnation and decline set in, with three factors largely responsible. First, the initial momentum provided by the Indian government in building the required infrastructure and itself organising and actively encouraging the hosting of conferences was not taken forward. The relative lack of multilingual conferences in the country today, as gathered from various signals discussed above, may partly be a reflection of changing global trends and the widespread use of English (as a lingua franca). However, there is no denying that underlying factors in the country have also not been conducive. Older convention centres, like the Vigyan Bhavan, are in urgent need of a makeover. There are some newer convention centres like the Hyderabad International Convention Centre, HICC (built in 2005) or the Jaipur Exhibition and Convention Centre (built in 2015), etc. Nevertheless, the number of international venues with all ancillary infrastructure remains very low for a country of India’s size. Without a flourishing meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) sector, conference interpreting in India has languished. A report commissioned by the Ministry of Tourism noted that India’s share in the global MICE industry stood at 0.96 per cent (Majestic MRSS 2019: 63). A significant corollary is that Indian interpreters have only limited exposure to international events and colleagues.

Second, no serious attempts were made to widen the scope for conference interpreting within the country by tapping into the regional languages market. The absence of a professional association to lobby for this and present economic arguments has been sorely felt here.

Lastly, sufficient attention has not been paid to developing excellence in training for grooming next generation interpreters. The confluence of these factors has prompted a vicious cycle where lack of work opportunities induces few young interpreters to opt for the profession,
with concomitant impacts on training leading to a shrinking pool of professional interpreters in the country.

While there are undoubtedly world-class interpreters in India who also work internationally, lack of certification leads to uneven quality, and standards are frequently compromised to cut costs in a highly competitive market. It seems imperative for awareness to be built about the quality available and the need for excellence to create long-term growth. The proposals under the NEP 2020 could provide a pathway if they are able to integrate the experience of conference interpreters and experts in the field to conceptualise and implement institutes of the highest standards.

The COVID crisis has already severely affected the conference interpreting industry worldwide. Technological developments, such as distance interpreting and artificial intelligence, pose new challenges. The question is how to seize possible silver linings. A visionary and innovative approach at this juncture could allow conference interpreting in India to reinvent itself by creating and addressing new markets with a focus on quality. The spurt in online meetings has provided space for minor conference languages that are otherwise rarely included in regular conference programmes because of logistical and cost-benefit considerations. Languages such as Hindi, Bengali and Tamil are also understood in other countries on the subcontinent and beyond, presenting an incentive for conference organisers to include them in such formats. Building on this and further developing existing capabilities in English and foreign languages as well as SLI have the potential to reverse the stagnation.

There is need for concerted action on several fronts: setting up schools for interpreter training in different regions to broaden outreach and facilitate the inclusion of regional languages; developing curricula for new technologies in training programmes; and founding professional interpreter bodies to set standards, raise awareness and at a policy level to work in tandem with the government and the MICE industry for creating the infrastructure and a conducive environment to meet the demands of a changing market. Such steps would give a boost to conference interpreting overall and help tap into the country’s inherently multilingual society.

Notes
3 Interview with N. Goswami, former Director (Simultaneous Interpretation Service), Rajya Sabha (25 November 2020).
4 P.D.T Achary, as quoted in Nichenametla (2012).
5 Interview with N. Goswami.
8 Interviews with A. Puri, V. Kawlra.
9 The foregoing discussion is based on interviews with A. Puri, V. Kawlra, R. Sethi, and A. Bakshi.
10 See interviews above.
11 Reply to questionnaire by retired Professor S. Ramakrishna.
12 See interviews above; email reply from N. Sra.
While there is no record of the number of conferences at which interpreting was provided over the years, anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a steady decline. For example, V. Kawlra in interview states that the number of work days was about 120/year in the 1980s and is currently approximately 50.

Personal communication with J.P. Allain (9 November 2020) regarding an AIIC member moving from Delhi to Bangkok in the 1990s. This continues to be the case: an AIIC member and a precandidate presently residing in the country have their professional domiciles elsewhere.

Survey responses by MEA interpreters and experiences of colleagues and the author with successive governments.

Interviews with A. Kurian, German interpreter with the MEA interpreter cell, on 10 November 2020.

Survey responses by MEA interpreters and experiences of colleagues and the author with successive governments.

Interviews with A. Puri, V. Kawlra and the authors’ own experience.

Interview with N. Goswami.

AYJNISHD in Mumbai and in Calcutta, Composite Regional Centre (CRC) in Nagpur, Deaf Dumb Association, Indore, ISLRTC in Delhi, RKMVU in Coimbatore and NISH in Trivandrum.


Anya Malhotra, who became an AIIC member in 2016.

Anecdotal statements by colleagues and author’s observation of assignments from April to November 2020.

Further reading


References


Chitra Harshvardhan and Anya Malhotra


Conference interpreting in India


