

## Let us learn to hear you

*V.S. Sunder*

There has been one noteworthy omission from among the list of issues faced by the differently abled that I have been addressing in this blog. I have been dearly wanting to be able to say something halfway meaningful about the travails of the hearing impaired. To date, I had made fairly serious attempts on at least four occasions, in vain, to get such a person to try and formulate some specific observances by 'normal people' which would mitigate some common difficulties they face. Maybe because hearing impairment is not overtly visible to people (like a person in a wheel-chair, or a visibility impaired person walking with the white cane), many people including me have very little real conception of the world of one who cannot hear.

But a few weeks ago, I received a wonderful email where the writer identified herself as a middle-aged woman from Mumbai, who had been faithfully reading my column for quite some time, and explained that she had a hearing impairment. I immediately sat up, thinking 'could this be my lead?' So I wrote back to her narrating the failed attempts discussed above, and asked if she would help me get a glimpse of the world from the perspective of one with her constraints. The very next day, I got this remarkably revealing email from her, which I simply reproduce below, verbatim and in toto, if only because it rings so true, and gives the reader a ring-side seat to the problems that people like her face every day:

*Thank you so much for your prompt and encouraging mail. I am so happy to know that you would like to touch upon the trials of hearing impaired folks . It is not at all insensitive on your part to do so, on the contrary it would be a good platform for sharing.*

*I do not mind sharing some of the problems I face which a hearing person takes for granted. Starting with my alarm clock in the morning, I do not hear the beep. It is my husband who hears it and wakes me up. However when I travel out of town my wake up call is the vibrator mode of the mobile phone. Simple rituals like the whistle of the pressure cooker and kettle requires my physical presence. For the door bell, additional ringers have been placed and a louder bell has been fixed. The biggest problem that one faces is communicating in a big group, when there are a lot of background noises, and following conversation is very difficult. Social exclusion does take place and one does not feel a sense of belonging; during the course of a conversation very often one misses out on vital information or a joke. When everybody laughs it becomes embarrassing and one is misunderstood to be stupid. Hearing impaired folks communicate visually and they get conversation clues through body language, facial expressions and lip movement. It is therefore important to face a hearing impaired person and communicate slowly rather than raise one's voice. Since one has to concentrate hard all the time to understand conversation, it leaves one very fatigued and tired.*

*Learning of languages is very difficult as one cannot hear the words and pronunciations clearly, I faced this problem whilst learning hindi in school. However now, exemptions from*

*languages are possible for hearing impaired students. While walking on the road one cannot hear the traffic from behind and this can prove to be fatal to one's life. One can get knocked down by a vehicle. While driving very often one cannot hear the traffic and overtaking of cars, visual driving and constant concentration are the ways of manouvering oneself through the traffic. At the airport the announcements are not clear therefore one is constantly vigilant and watching the monitors for flight updates. Entertainment - while watching television and movies all is not deciphered. However sometimes subtitles are used and these are a boon for the hearing impaired. Communicating through mobile phones, where in text messaging and the option of the vibrator mode is convenient, emails and the use of skype and video phones are also very convenient for hearing impaired folks.*

*Parents may sometimes miss detecting hearing impairment in their child and may attribute low grades in school to laziness or inattentiveness. A young deaf and dumb lady was trained to work as a beautician. One of her seniors passed on some instructions which she could not hear and therefore she did not respond. The senior was furious and slapped her hard. The senior was not aware of her problem, and apologised to her later. This is one of many incidents faced by the hearing impaired folks.*

Thank you Rekha!