

WHAT YOU DON'T HEAR, YOU SIGN

The Story of a Girl from the Hills

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Written by
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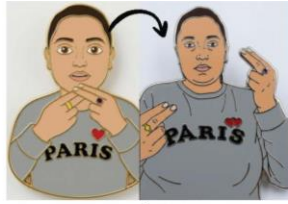
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My



story



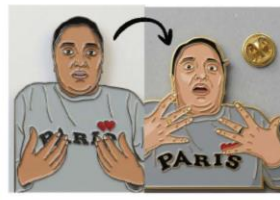
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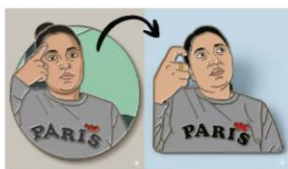
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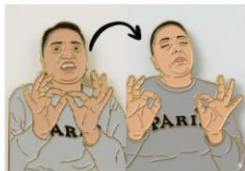
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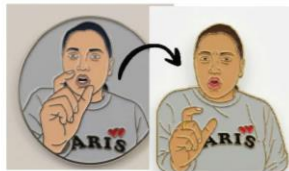
Reading



Journey



Simple



Words



Powerful



One



Read



Many



Emotions



Read



Today



Tomorrow



Inspire

Tarun Sarwal is a

humanitarian innovator and social entrepreneur with a career spanning development, technology, and disability inclusion. He was a founding member of the Urmul Trust in Rajasthan, where he helped revive weaving communities, before working for Oxfam and the British Red Cross in India and Sri Lanka. At the ICRC, he served as Head of the Innovation Initiative, facilitating humanitarian action through technology and managing pilot projects across the sector. After leaving the ICRC, he co-founded SignAble Communications, a Bengaluru-based startup providing on-demand Indian Sign Language interpretation, empowering deaf people to communicate without barriers. He is currently studying Fine Art.



Acknowledgement

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I also thank my sister, Ambika Chettri, who communicated with me using Nepali language and basic sign language. She became my bridge to the hearing world, helping me understand conversations and supporting me through many moments in life. Her patience, love, and support gave me strength and confidence during difficult times.

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This journey would not have been possible without the love, support, and belief of all these wonderful people. Thank you for being part of my life and inspiring me to continue dreaming, growing, and making a difference.

With gratitude and love.

Here is my story....

An anxious father and even more anxious relatives waited patiently in the maternity ward of a small hospital in a beautiful village nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas. As the umbilical cord was cut and I took my first breath, tears rolled down my eyes, but my voice was unheard.

I am Rupmani Chhetri, and this is my story. Every human being is born with five senses: eyes to see, ears to hear, a mouth to speak, skin to feel, and a nose to smell. But I was born with only three. I am deaf.

When you come across someone who is deaf, you tend to relate them to Helen Keller, who was also blind. Born to a family in a remote village in Nepal, I was the first person born without two active senses.

My family consisted of my parents and four children, two boys and two girls. Without access to education, my parents lived a life of ignorance, but were happy with our limited resources. Their ignorance played a huge role in my life, as they did not know that someone could be born without the ability to hear or speak.

Six months after my birth, my family moved to Darjeeling, India. My family turned to religion to find solace in my inability to speak. Temples after temples, rituals after rituals, prayers were unheard by the Lord, and I continued to remain deaf. Hope for a miracle quickly turned to frustration.

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It was my first step into the world of education when I was enrolled in a small school in Kalimpong that had classes up to the fourth grade. Teachers are ranked third in the shloka: Matha (mother), Pitha (father), Guru (teacher), and Devam (God), but my fear of teachers was very different from that of other students.

A ruler was the tool teachers used to discipline naughty students, and I was a victim of the same. The only difference was that I was subjected to abuse because of my disability.

My teacher used the ruler to stab into my throat, hoping to hear me utter a few words, but the only sound that was heard was that of distress. Helpless, I tried to sign my despair, but everyone around seemed to ignore my helplessness and were rather determined to find a solution through physical abuse.

Hoping for a change, I was transferred to a different school in fifth grade. While other students spent one year in each grade, I was forced to repeat every grade twice. The only solution I had was to copy notes from my bench mate, as everything that was orated in class, I couldn't hear, let alone understand.

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Friendship was something I was devoid of. I was considered an outcast because I was different. My peers, too, were ignorant, and I was a victim of bullying.

Everything about me suggested that I came from a financially poor background. When my classmates had lunch boxes filled with yummy and tasty dishes, mine was dull and subpar compared to theirs. Along with my disability, these factors contributed to me being considered an outcast. Every lunch break, I spent eating alone, leaning against the pink pillar of the school corridor while my peers shared their lunch and played together.

The trauma because of those teachers didn't seem to stop. I still remember when one teacher taught me the word "Bachao" (help), which I was unable to say. I became a victim of the ruler once again. That one word seemed to be the answer to everything. One afternoon, my teacher asked me a question, and since I was unable to answer, she beat me with a bamboo stick. I screamed, "Bachao, bachao" with all my might. The room fell silent, and I

was rushed to the principal's cabin. Even before the pain from the beating had subsided, news reached my family, and soon everyone in my village was chanting, "Rupmani has spoken."

The gods were awakened from their afternoon slumber as everyone thanked Him for this miracle. Little did they realize that it was a sound of despair rather than a miracle.

Everything went back to square one. I was once again the cursed girl of the village. My relatives, in disgust and frustration, advised my father to stop wasting money on my education, as I was considered a lost cause. But, to my luck, my father wanted all his children to be educated with at least the basic knowledge of the world. He had grown up ignorant due to lack of education, and he made sure his children didn't have to suffer the same fate.

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As I turned 14, puberty hit me hard. Coming from an orthodox family and entering an even more orthodox society, I was forced to live by a strict set of rules. With no access to pads, we had to use cloth as a substitute. The topic of menstruation was hushed and hidden away. All I knew was that I would get severe pain in my lower stomach and bleed for four days a month. I had no answers to why, what, and how this happened, but I was given new instructions to follow.

These included things like not being allowed to mingle with anyone, boys were banned, and I was restricted to a corner. The girls in my class also became women in the days to come. They spoke about menstruation. They had answers to why, what, and how, but even as they explained it to me, I couldn't comprehend what they were trying to say, and I was once again left in the dark.

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Tenth grade is a crucial year in every student's life. From kindergarten to high school, a child spends an average of 10-12

years in education, whereas I was forced to spend almost 16-18 years of my life for the same. It wasn't just because of my disability but also because the people around me failed to understand how to treat someone who was deaf. The teachers at my school were highly literate but uneducated. They used the tip of a ruler to discipline my disability. It wasn't a situation where I refused to speak, but I was unable to. My teachers saw this as arrogance, but failed to understand that it was helplessness. They took me to the principal as a last resort to make me quit my studies, as I couldn't comprehend like the other students. But because of my father's wish to see his children educated, I was able to continue my studies.

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Since I needed extra help with studies, I decided to attend tuitions. There was a big catch: my family couldn't afford a private tutor. The barter system came to my rescue. I traded household work—sweeping, mopping, and washing dishes—with my private tutor for extra help with my schoolwork.

The bonds with the siblings plays a major role in one's life. I have two good brothers and one caring sister. The failure to communicate again became a hurdle in our relationship. As kids, they tried to communicate with me through signs, but due to stress from everyone else, I was isolated and left to be my own playmate. They tried speaking to me in our native language, Nepali, but I was unable to understand. Loneliness hit me hard as I was isolated and left alone. I could see in people's eyes that they were filled with pity, sympathy, and a few even had disgust towards me. It was now just me against the world.

I was filled with anger, fear, loneliness, and I had lost all hope. As we grew older, we had to contribute to help finance the family. My siblings helped with selling vegetables in the market, while I engaged in manual labour.

Growing up in a hilly terrain, I found myself a job breaking rocks. For every boulder I turned into stones, I was paid Rs. 20/-, but it wasn't enough. I started a second job, carrying cement on my back from the valley to the rooftop as my second source of income. The money earned was spent on schoolbooks and uniforms.

During winter vacations, I worked all day and part-time while attending school. Although my sister was younger than me, we were in the same grade but in different sections. I was close to my sister. I remember the nights we spent playing under the blanket after everyone had slept, using signs. She seemed to empathize with me and gave me a reason to smile.

There was one incident that traumatized me to this day. One evening, I was left with my grandmother at home while the rest of the family was out. I had to attend nature's call, but I couldn't communicate it with her. The harder I tried, the more difficult it became to control it. With only one solution, my grandmother tore her saree and gave me a piece to relieve myself. The next day, my father arrived to see the faeces and urine dampened in the saree and was enraged. That day, my father's harsh words hurt me so badly that I went to sleep with tears in my eyes, filled with self-doubt and uncertainty.

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The mentality of society played a major role in my upbringing. Western clothing was a big no. Sleeveless tops and jeans were restricted. I was only allowed to wear a chudidhar with a shawl. Eager to wear Western clothes, I approached my neighbour and borrowed her jeans. It was the first and last time I wore them during those days because that one attempt resulted in another anger outburst from my father.

We got a television in our house for the first time when I was about 16. Until then, we watched our favourite TV show that ran

for an hour every Saturday at 2 p.m. All of us were excited about the new gadget. I was fascinated by the colours and pictures as I tried to move the antenna to get the perfect clarity of the cable. But, like every other household, the TV was used by my parents to watch the news and was then under surveillance.

One evening, my father scolded me for some reason, and my mother felt very bad for me. After my father left, she let me watch my first movie on screen. It was a Hindi movie, *Mujhse Dosti Karogi* (*Will You Be My Friend*). Those were the days when there were no subtitles to read and understand, but although I couldn't hear, I enjoyed every bit of the two-and-a-half-hour movie.

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The visits to temples didn't end. My parents refused to give up on the belief that religious pujas would bring me to speak. Every time I visited a temple, it choked me, until one day my parents and I visited the local temple in my village. As I was walking around, I saw a young boy using sign language to communicate with his fellow-mate. It was the first time I had ever seen someone sign. Excited and curious, I went to him and communicated using my hands that I was also deaf. It was the first time I felt related to someone. I couldn't control my excitement. Since I didn't know sign language, I used a stick to write in the mud to tell him to come home and meet my parents and me. It was the first time I had hope that my parents could see and understand that I wasn't the only one with the inability to speak and hear.

Just like I requested, he came home. I brought a boy into an orthodox house. That caused a huge uproar. My parents turned the house upside down in anger, unable to believe that a teenage girl had the audacity to bring a person of the opposite gender to their house, let alone communicate with a boy.

Just like how all teens do, I met him in secret. He opened my eyes to a whole new world I didn't know existed. We walked into a

church where it felt like my safest haven. It was a church filled with deaf people, communicating in sign language; a room filled with laughter and happiness.

It was my first time in a church. I didn't know the customs to follow. I saw him kneel, fold his hands, and bend his head down to pray to the Lord nailed to the cross. It was the first time I felt relief in a religious place. I did the same and spoke to the Lord through my thoughts. It brought me a lot of relief and solace. I had finally found a place where I was accepted without any judgment. I was finally free to be myself.

I bought a picture of Christ and a Bible to keep that feeling with me all the time. The minute I entered home and brought in a religion other than my own, my parents flipped out. I was left locked in a room alone with my thoughts, but my heart was still at the church. I decided to kneel, fold my hands, bend my head, and ask the Lord for peace.

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In a conservative household, the introduction to another religion was unimaginable. There was a misconception in the house when the Bible and the Holy Cross were introduced – that I was going to change my religion. I made my family understand that God is one and that religion is a method of relating to the Superior. All religions, at the end of the day, share the same message of doing good to others, living an honest life, and believing in oneself. My family understood that I wasn't going to change my religion, but rather, I was educating myself about Christianity and found solace in hymns and prayers.

As I sat on the bench in the front corridor of my house, I saw the world pass by like a movie without any sound or subtitles. My knowledge was restricted to the four walls of my house, the hard work of labor, and the little knowledge I gained from education. I always wondered what life beyond the hills of Darjeeling was

like, and it both fascinated and scared me, but I was filled with curiosity, hoping that one day I would see what the mountains hid.

My father and I took a trip to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Delhi. It was a whole new world to me. There were classes on stitching, embroidery, candle-making, and basic computer skills. I attended the classes for two months and earned my first certificate. It was the first laminated sheet of paper that recognized me for much more than just being a deaf person. It was a certificate of appreciation—something I had longed for, and now I had proof of it.

Now it was time to head back to reality. Back in Darjeeling, I requested my father to continue my education at NIOS, the National Institute of Open Schooling. Unfortunately, the financial situation at home prevented me from getting a fair chance at education. It was time to go back to work.

The skills I learned in stitching and embroidery at Aurobindo came in handy when I joined a place where they hand-stitched, designed, and sold mats. I spent 12 hours a day from 6 am to 6 pm working on these unique mats that were exported, but I was paid only Rs. 150/-, which was a pittance compared to the profit they made from sales. Here, we can see the twist in merchandising, trading, and consumerism—all the hard work for very little pay.

I learned the importance of saving. Whether it was a penny or two, I understood that I needed to keep a small amount aside for myself just in case. Hiring any mode of transport was unthinkable because three-quarters of the payment would go into travel, so I used the only alternative I had left—walking.

Monday to Saturday was my routine, where I spent 14 hours a day outside my house. Two hours were spent going up and down the hilly terrain, and 12 hours were spent working nonstop. My

only relief was on Sundays. That was the day I had a few minutes for a quiet conversation with Christ.

Fourteen hours of struggle were both taxing on me and questionable to my family. A young girl spending so little time at home was considered taboo, so I was forced to quit my job. In a way, it was good because my fingers were completely wrecked, my nails were chapped, and I was forced to work in extremely cold conditions—all for merely Rs. 150/-.

It was now time for my next assignment. I found a job at a massage parlour. Darjeeling, being one of the most famous tourist destinations for both Indians and foreigners, was known as “The Queen of the Hills.” We were famous for freshly hand-plucked teas, our rich culture, and, of course, massage parlours—legitimate ones.

That was when I became a masseuse. My clients were mostly tourists, and I had to give them oil massages. My salary doubled from Rs. 150/- to Rs. 300/-, but I was not happy.

Next came my fourth job, which brought me a lot of happiness. I was referred to a job through the church at a Christian school. The timings and the salary worked out in my favour. It was a 9 am to 2 pm job, and I was paid Rs. 1200/- per month. It worked well, as I could now help at home. Everybody was happy.

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Back in the day, banks were considered the protectors of assets—money, jewellery, important documents, and so on. I had zero knowledge of this, but I had complete trust in a friend. I made sure to share a small portion of my income with my friend on the first day of every month to save in her bank. A few I hid in my piggy bank, while the rest I gave to my family as a devoted daughter.

One evening, I broke open my piggy bank and counted the coins and notes, only to find a few notes missing. I immediately approached my friend. That was the day I learned what betrayal meant. She denied that I had given her any money, and when I cross-checked with the bank, there were no deposits made. That day, I learned two valuable lessons: the only person you can trust is yourself, and money can make people behave in ways you never imagined.

With the little I had, I bought my first asset—a Motorola phone. I was so excited. At the shop, when the executive opened the box, I was shaking inside. As he was about to remove the plastic from the phone screen, I stopped him. I took my black mobile phone, held it close to my hand, and slowly removed the plastic. It was the first time in ages that I felt there could be freedom for me. The phone being taken out of the box felt like one day, I too would rip away the plastic holding my wings and fly over the mountains to see a beautiful world.

Girls are built differently. We see our future complete with the perfect man, a perfect career, and a happily ever after. I had the same dream. I was now a woman, and I felt it was time for me to step into the next phase of my life—to share it with a man who loved and respected me. There were a few boys around, but I wanted a man—one who was independent, could protect and take care of me, and was financially stable with a government job. There were no online matrimonial platforms or dating sites to look for a man, so I reached out to my friends to set me up with my dream guy.

It was time for matchmaking. There were four boys to choose from. After a brief conversation, only via text, I shortlisted one guy who seemed perfect for me. Mind you, all of this was done in secret. We had a basic Nokia mobile phone that was a secret amongst our friends. It passed from one friend to another,

containing all our secrets, because our family had access to our personal phones.

It was time to meet my guy. He was from Delhi, the capital of our country. Being the gentleman he was, he came to Darjeeling to meet me, and it was love at first sight. He was tall, clean-shaven, and wearing formal attire. I had only one demand of him: to take care of me and always support me. He hugged me with an affirmative "yes," and I knew it was time to step into the next phase of my life.

Although he was 12 years older and from a different caste, I didn't mind because I knew I would be safe and happy with him. But there was just one problem – my family would never accept him. I had no other option but to run away with him.

My life changed one Friday evening. It was one of my cousin's wedding receptions, and we planned to run away that night. I packed my bags in secret and kept all my belongings ready. My parents were already at the wedding venue. My sister was taking a shower, and I knocked on her bathroom door. She opened it halfway, and I signed to her that I was running away that night with the man of my dreams. My sister was speechless, but soon her face turned red with anger. Even before she could utter a word, I was out of there.

Carrying my brown bag, I kept walking. Tears flowed down my eyes. I was both sad and happy, leaving behind my family, but at the same time, I was looking forward to my exciting future with him. I met him at the taxi stand, and we took a grey Maruti Alto from Darjeeling to Siliguri. Before I knew it, I was on the plains after a whole life in the mountains. I turned back to see my past slowly disappear along with the mountains.

We reached Siliguri airport. It was my first time at an airport. I had only seen planes in the sky, waving at them as children. I

quickly changed into a saree, entering womanhood—a new role as a wife, sharing my life with someone special, close to my heart.

As I sat at the boarding gate, the flight that seemed so small was massive across the windows of the airport. I clenched his hand, shivering in fear as I walked through the aerobridge into the flight. It looked like a bus, but much fancier. The cabin crew were smiling, welcoming us as I walked down the aisle, seeing rows of seats filled with strangers. I sat at the window seat, and he helped me with my seatbelt.

As I watched the cabin crew with the safety demonstrations, I looked out the window, feeling my stomach in my chest, nauseated at first, but that soon faded as I saw the world from a bird's-eye view. Through the white clouds, I looked down to see houses, trees, roads, and vehicles—all in one frame, tiny as ever. It seemed like my life through the years—small, limited, yet beautiful.

I placed my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes, taking a deep breath, looking forward to the new life I had when the plane touched down in Delhi.

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As the plane came to a halt, I switched on my phone to find 20 missed calls and numerous messages from my family. My hand trembled in panic as I showed my future husband the phone. He immediately took it from me, removed the back cover, took out the small blue SIM card, and broke it into two.

I was now ready to start the next chapter of my life. We took an auto rickshaw to his friend's house. It was a small flat on the third floor of a yellow building. I spent three days shopping for my wedding. As a soon-to-be bride, I was excited about it. Like how all brides have a bachelorette party and bridesmaids to help with the wedding, I was left to fend for myself.

My fiancé had to keep me hidden for some time until he broke the news to his family. He returned to work and stayed with his family, while I stayed in his friend's place. Every day, he went to work, where his mother packed his lunch. Before he left, he would drop by the flat to leave his tiffin for me, which I had for brunch. After work, he visited me again, and we shared dinner together.

Finally, it was my wedding day. We had a simple temple wedding. I entered the temple as a blushing bride, wearing my new red saree, three artificial gold chains, and red bangles. Among the four boys, the three I had rejected joined our small celebration as witnesses. They brought two garlands, which my now-husband and I exchanged. It was a typical Hindu wedding, where he held my hand as we walked around the fire, performing the seven pheras, which included seven vows and promises we as a couple had to follow for the next seven lives we would spend together. These included vows of respect, prosperity, happiness, love for our respective families, prayer for noble children, a long, peaceful life, and a bond filled with loyalty, togetherness, and companionship.

The pandit instructed my now-husband to place the red sindoor on my forehead. With that, we were now officially a married couple. There was just one last step remaining: registering our marriage. We left the temple with our three friends and went to the sub-registrar's office. My knowledge of a wedding had ended with the seven pheras, but I didn't know we had to officially be married under the law. Upon entering the office, I felt a wave of heat hit my face. It was filled with newly married couples. Many had their immediate families celebrating with them as they waited in line. At that moment, I missed my family the most. On this important day, I longed for the blessings of my parents and elders, as well as hugs from my siblings and cousins.

We signed the register, and it was now official: I was a wife. The dream of having the perfect husband was now coming true.

After the wedding, we continued staying at his friend's house. It was fine until the wedding, but afterwards, I became uncomfortable staying there. My husband and I moved to a small hotel. The same routine from before the wedding continued. I was left alone throughout the day, while he visited me only for a couple of hours in the late evening. It didn't bother me much, as I was ignorant of the role of a wife. I didn't know how to run a household. Cooking, cleaning, and even the basic chores were all unknown to me. The little knowledge I had was from observing my mother. I didn't even have anyone to call for advice.

My husband announced his promotion from bachelor to married man at his office and treated his colleagues to sweets. Even before the celebration ended, the news of his marriage reached his mother. When he arrived home, he was questioned like a criminal, and he finally confessed everything and told his family about me.

The sun was setting, and it was 6 p.m. I was eagerly waiting for my husband to come home. There was a knock, and I ran to open the door with excitement, only to find not just my husband, but an older lady with him. It was my mother-in-law. My husband didn't say a word, but his eyes communicated that I should touch her feet. I was confused and didn't understand what he was trying to tell me.

According to their tradition, it was customary to touch the feet of elders and press them three times to seek their blessings. Coming from a completely different cultural background, I had no idea about these traditions. Traditions are a huge part of Indian culture, and in India, they don't just differ from state to state but from village to village, district to district.

My mother-in-law was wearing a traditional pink saree. As my husband bent down to touch her feet, I followed suit. Her feet were a bit dirty, but I pressed them three times, just as I had seen my husband do. Unfortunately, the pressure with which I pressed her feet caused her pain, and she ended up kicking me, causing me to fall to the floor. My husband helped me up, held my hand, and guided me as we both lay on the floor on our stomachs to take her blessings.

I could feel the judgment in her eyes. She scanned the room, grabbed a shawl, and placed it over my head, bringing it down to cover my eyes. I couldn't see anything. Not only was I blinded in sight, but it was too late before I realized that I was entering a life of darkness.

The next day, we packed our bags, checked out of the hotel, and headed to my second home. I was anxious yet excited, looking forward to being welcomed into a new family and starting a new life in a new home.

It was time for a celebration. We held a small reception where I was adorned with a beautiful red saree, bangles, and mehendi. I stood behind my husband on stage as his relatives and friends came to greet us. I was wearing their traditional dress, which included the chunni (a part of the saree to cover the head and eyes), unable to see, but feeling the vibrations of the sound and flashes of party lights through the silk cloth over my head.

Although it seemed festive, there was not a single person from my side. I was eager to call my parents and siblings, wanting them to join the celebration, but I was afraid and guilt-ridden. My last resort was to send them pictures. I stared at my phone, hoping for positive messages from my family, but when the notification bell rang, the message read, "We are disappointed in you, and please do not contact us." Tears flowed as I read these words, but I had to pull myself together, stay strong, and look forward to tomorrow.

I was now the new bride. My husband and I never went on a honeymoon, but I didn't mind because all my time went into meeting relatives and being introduced as "The Bahu" (The Daughter-in-law). Introductions to relatives weren't just in Delhi, but we also visited my husband's village to take blessings in their family temple.

It was the first time in my life that I was afraid and uncomfortable in the presence of God. They believed in animal sacrifice as a ritual. I am a pure vegetarian, and it terrified me. They sacrificed a pig by cutting its head off. It gave me goosebumps, and all I could think of was how to leave that place. My mother-in-law and immediate family forced me to participate in the puja because it was vital for every newcomer to seek blessings from their family deity.

I was petrified. My mother-in-law asked me to pay for the puja, but I had no money. She was furious. I was very uncomfortable throughout the entire puja. Since I couldn't contribute financially, I was completely ignored. In a way, it was a good thing, as I didn't have to eat pork. My husband secretly handed me some money, and I sneaked out, went to a small shop nearby, and bought some snacks to fill my hunger.

The initial few days flew by with smiles and small adjustments, but soon I faced the true colors of my new family members. It started small, like my dressing. As the daughter-in-law of the household, it was mandatory to wear a saree, bangles, a nose ring, and keep my eyes and head always covered with the chunni. It took me some time to get used to wearing a saree, as I had worn chudidars all my life.

There were six adults and two children in the house—a proper joint family. My parents-in-law, brother-in-law, his wife and kids, my husband, and I. It was a small house with two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. The main bedroom was used by my parents-in-law. The other small bedroom was shared by the rest

of us. There was no privacy. I had to sleep on the cold floor. Some nights, I was forced to sleep in the hall.

As the day began, the men left for work, and we three women were left to handle the household chores. I had zero knowledge when it came to household chores or cooking—basically, the role of a housewife.

They spoke a different language. My mother-in-law and sister-in-law took care of the kitchen, and their meals included chapati and sabji, while I had grown up eating rice my whole life. There were a lot of things I had to adjust to. Everything had changed. The clothes I wore, the food I ate, and the things around me seemed like an unsolvable mystery, no matter how much I tried. Since I couldn't cook, the two women asked me to pay for food. I had no source of income and had to ask my husband. I didn't want to burden him, but I had no other choice.

While we all sat together in the living room, I was forced to sit on the floor. I was considered an outcast, and the home I had looked forward to was being turned into just a house of pain and torment. I was only allowed to eat after everyone else had eaten, provided there was food left. Things were slowly falling apart.

The honeymoon phase, where my husband seemed to be the perfect man, slowly faded. He was a total mama's boy. We never had our own space or spent time together as a couple. Anytime I asked him to go out, he first approached his family, asked their opinion, and they always told him no, so I was stuck at home.

He showed his true colours eventually, and the man I loved slowly disappeared in front of my own eyes. He had promised to always support me, but I was left to fend for myself and be my own support. There was no one on my team.

One evening, after a long time, we decided to go to a church. I was thrilled because it was my first outing with my husband. It was a beautiful church, and there I met my inspiration, Ms.

Geetha, who welcomed me into her organization. It was a whole New Haven for me. There were other deaf people, their families, spouses, children, and parents – all happy and together as one big joyful community.

The happiness soon faded when my husband restricted me from going there. I had finally

found a place, but it was so near, yet so far out of my reach. One day, as I sat on the veranda crying, my husband's friend, who was like a brother to me, approached and consoled me. He promised to take me to the Deaf society in Noida, just a few kilometres away, where there were deaf teachers.

NDS (Noida Deaf Society) was my first step into the deaf community. It was there that I met Ms. Geeta Sharma, who changed my life for the better. At the time, she was the General Secretary, and she is now the Vice President of the National Association for the Deaf.

I finally began learning sign language at the age of 22. I made new friends and, for the first time, had a social life outside my marriage. It was there that I met my best friend, Sandhya Singh, who was also deaf and helped me learn sign language. I had classes every Tuesday and Thursday. I would take the metro to attend these sessions, and my husband's friend – let's call him Mr. B – would pick me up from the station. He claimed to see me as a sister, and I was happy to finally have someone I could confide in.

Attending classes became a big issue in my husband's household. He disapproved of me stepping out, expecting me to remain at home and be the "perfect" housewife. Things got harder by the day. My in-laws began demanding dowry, despite knowing I had left behind my entire life – my family, my home, my friends – for their son. They specifically asked for gold. Even though dowry is illegal, they did not seem to care.

I reached a breaking point and begged my husband to move out and start a life of our own. Eventually, he agreed, and we shifted to a small house. I was excited to finally turn that space into a home—just the two of us, building the life I had dreamed of.

We moved in with nothing but a bag of clothes and a few necessities. I didn't know where to begin in setting up our home, and that's when Ms. Geeta came to my rescue. She gave me everything—utensils, a gas stove, a fan, a cupboard. She helped me set up my dream home.

Even after we moved out, the interference from my in-laws didn't stop. Every visit turned into criticism—complaints about the house, which they equated to my inability to run a household. Their ongoing dowry demands left me feeling helpless. I began questioning whether my decision to run away with my husband had been a mistake.

It was time to become independent. I wanted to create my own identity and make a difference in society. The first step was to find a job.

I began as a volunteer at AADI, where we went door to door collecting census data. It was tiring work, but it gave me a sense of purpose, individuality, and freedom. However, as the role was unpaid, it couldn't sustain me.

I soon landed my first interview—for the role of Program Associate at The HAQ: Centre for Children's Rights, Delhi. It was my first ever interview. I was nervous and unsure if they'd understand me since I used sign language. But luck was on my side—I got the job. It was a basic data entry role that I picked up quickly, and I became a woman who received a salary on the 1st of every month.

My career and marriage moved in opposite directions. While I was thriving at work and enjoying the independence, my marriage was deteriorating.

The loving, supportive partner I had been promised before marriage slowly revealed himself to be someone else. My husband belonged to a lower caste, which never mattered to me—we married for love. But his community was generally narrow-minded, and while my husband was educated, he was incredibly stingy.

Buying basic groceries became a chore, as he insisted on the cheapest options. A 10-minute task turned into an hour-long ordeal. I longed for simple joys—gifts, shopping, a meal out—but even when we could afford small luxuries, he denied me those. He insisted I buy poor-quality clothing, even when a better option was within our budget. I wanted to look good and dress well, but I had to settle for what was available. The only time I got something nice was once a year—on my birthday.

These might seem like small issues, but they hurt deeply. I envied happy couples because I longed for the life I was promised but never received. This growing dissatisfaction created emotional distance between us.

Let me now introduce Mr. B again—my husband's friend. He claimed to see me as a sister, but that was a facade. He was married and had two children. My husband trusted him blindly and never questioned his intentions. Sadly, I realized the truth too late.

At first, I trusted Mr. B. He began picking me up after classes at NDS, and I saw him as an elder brother. One day, he took me to a park and suddenly kissed me on the cheek. Shocked, I confronted him, but he dismissed it, saying brothers kissed sisters too. I should have seen the red flag, but I let it slide.

Over time, his conversations shifted from casual topics to sexual ones. He told me I was naïve, that women from villages like me knew nothing, and that city women were more open-minded. He

claimed extramarital affairs were normal and used clever words to manipulate me.

Mr. B played two roles—the respectful friend in front of my husband and the predator behind his back. Sadly, my husband trusted him more than he trusted me.

In class, I had made new friends who often went out for coffee or a movie. I craved a social life I had never experienced growing up. But Mr. B ruined that too. He would message and call incessantly and always show up right after class, never giving me the chance to be with my friends.

One evening, I ignored his messages and joined my friends at a café. When I got home, both Mr. B and my husband were waiting. Mr. B slapped me across the face. I looked at my husband, expecting protection—but he smirked and said I deserved it. That was the first time I felt truly alone in my own home. I realized my husband would never defend me.

When I began working, my husband belittled me, claiming that women from my background couldn't hold a job. He said my place was in the kitchen, serving him.

One evening, Mr. B and his wife came over for dinner. She was a simple, devoted woman—completely unaware of his true character. After dinner, Mr. B returned alone, and while I was cleaning the kitchen, he groped me. Horrified, I ran to tell my husband. But instead of confronting his friend, he dismissed my story and accused me of overreacting.

That night, a major fight erupted. My husband accused me of having an affair because I was working and not home enough. He ignored the fact that it was his friend who had crossed the line. I cried myself to sleep, finally realizing the kind of man I had married.

I confided in Geeta, the only person I could trust. But even she told me to "adjust"—because a wife's duty was to serve her husband.

At work, it was the financial year-end, and I stayed late to help with closing. When I got home at 7:30 p.m., my husband was waiting at the door. Instead of listening, he yelled and accused me of being with someone else.

From then on, he began having me followed. I soon noticed Mr. B tailing me. One day, he even entered our bedroom and masturbated in front of me. I ran to my husband and told him everything, but he dismissed it. He slapped me for creating "a scene" in front of a guest.

Mr. B became a regular visitor. I was expected to cook and serve him daily. Eventually, I began distancing myself—I moved to a separate room and avoided any contact with my husband. I needed space to think. I began video-calling friends for support, but my husband would spy on my conversations, accusing me of infidelity.

Then came Mr. C—another of my husband's friends. I feared he would be like Mr. B, but he came to "help us patch up." He reminded me that I was dependent on my husband for everything, even groceries, which I bought using his Below Poverty Line (BPL) card. That night, I lost it.

Everyone wanted to fix my marriage—except my husband. I was painted as the villain. I had had enough.

With the help of my friends, I found an unfurnished flat. I packed the same bag I had brought from my village and walked out—to freedom. My husband begged me to return, but now I was earning. I didn't need to rely on anyone.

It was time to move on, leave the toxicity behind, and start living life on my terms.

I began my independent life—one that was far more difficult and challenging than I had anticipated. I shared my living situation with my colleagues, explaining that I had left my husband. They advised me to inform the local police, in case my husband filed a missing person report. This, they said, would help avoid unnecessary complications.

My colleagues accompanied me to the police station and supported me as I explained the situation. I told the officers that my husband had been abusive and that it was my decision to leave and live alone. I simply wanted to stay on the safer side in case he tried anything.

The backlash of leaving my husband came sooner than I had expected. My husband and Mr. B began spreading vicious rumours about me—claiming I had multiple affairs, that I was a terrible wife, and much more, which I heard through friends. I had had enough. One day, I went straight to Mr. B's house to confront him.

I rang the doorbell, and his wife answered. She welcomed me warmly and went to the kitchen to make tea while I sat on the sofa. Without hesitation, I confronted Mr. B about the rumours. He casually blamed my husband and denied having any part in it. I was shocked by how easily he deflected blame. I knew then what I had to do.

I walked into the kitchen and told his wife that her husband had touched me inappropriately and misbehaved with me on multiple occasions.

She looked at me, stunned, and went into the living room to question Mr. B. He immediately got defensive and denied everything. He manipulated her by swearing on her and their two children, placing his hand on her head, insisting that I was making false accusations.

His wife looked at me with disgust and asked me to leave. That day, I decided to block Mr. B from my life—for good.

My office was within walking distance from my home. Every day followed the same routine: work, home, repeat. I earned Rs. 10,000 per month, of which Rs. 6,000 went to rent. Saving money was out of the question. I had to survive on the remaining Rs. 4,000, which had to cover groceries, electricity, water, and other necessities. I was living hand to mouth.

It was the first time I had ever lived alone. Loneliness crept in, and I began to fall into depression. There was nothing to look forward to, and it began to affect me deeply. I couldn't go back to my hometown—not after what I had done to my family. The guilt began to consume me. I missed my family terribly and cried myself to sleep almost every night.

One day, my colleagues told me about divorce. It was the first time I had ever heard the term. I had no idea what it meant. They explained that it was a legal way to permanently separate from my husband and annul our marriage officially.

We went to the family court and filed a divorce petition. Since I was deaf, it was filed pro bono. My husband received the notice, and soon, court hearings began. He refused to cooperate. I didn't understand why he wouldn't agree to a divorce.

My friends explained it to me—because he was a government employee with a stable income and property, he would be obligated to pay me alimony. That fear, they said, was why he was resisting the divorce.

Ms. Geeta asked me to come to the church for a meeting with him. I was hesitant but eventually agreed. We sat on a bench outside, and Geeta started the conversation. My husband remained silent while she told me he didn't want a divorce. She continued to advise me, saying, "These things happen in a marriage. A woman must adjust and maintain the institution of marriage."

I grew increasingly uncomfortable. Geeta knew how he had treated me—emotionally and mentally—and yet she was supporting him. I became furious. I stood up and told her not to contact me again, walking away without looking back.

That Friday morning at work, a colleague told me Geeta was waiting at reception. I didn't want to see her, but she had been my friend, so I agreed. When I sat down next to her, she immediately held my hand and apologized for what had happened at the church. She admitted she was wrong to support my husband and said it wasn't fair to me. We hugged, smiled, and reconciled—our friendship stronger than ever.

I continued going to church—it was the only place where I felt at peace. I learned about deaf rights, advocacy, and the importance of empowering the deaf community. It took me 22 years to realize that there was a whole world supporting the deaf, with access to sign language, support groups, and much more.

But while the church gave me solace, returning home always brought back guilt and darkness. I regretted walking away from my family. My present consisted of work, church, and home—and my future felt uncertain. I occasionally met my friends, who comforted me and reassured me that time heals. They even suggested that a second marriage wasn't a bad idea, especially now that my divorce had finally been granted.

I had told my husband I wanted nothing from him—not alimony, not property, not any connection. And with that, the divorce was finalized. But I was still recovering from the trauma. I made it clear: I would not enter another relationship anytime soon. It was time to focus on myself.

One day, I met an 8-year-old girl who had lost her mother, and her father had abandoned her at an orphanage. She was innocent and unaware of the world, and somehow I related to her. Her ignorance was different from mine, but we both had to learn basic

things others took for granted. She wore shabby clothes and used plastic bags as innerwear.

I wanted to call the Child Rights Helpline, but I was helpless – I couldn't speak, and I had no access to an interpreter. Geeta came to my rescue and sent her daughter, who helped us report the case. Authorities arrived, took the girl, and assured us she would be placed in a home.

A few days later, we called to check and were told she had been sent to a home in Uttar Pradesh. She was happy, going to school, and learning. Knowing this filled me with joy. She had a chance at a normal life.

It was then that I realized – social work and volunteering brought me happiness. My purpose was clear: advocacy for the deaf community.

One cool Saturday evening, Geeta's daughter and I were sitting in the park, signing to each other. Though the park was bustling with noise, we were immersed in our silent world. A teenage boy approached us and asked Geeta's daughter if he could learn sign language. I was surprised – he wasn't deaf and didn't need to learn it. That's when it struck me: **this** was my mission – **sign language**.

Advocating for the deaf community isn't just about helping the deaf – it's about encouraging others to learn to communicate with us. Just as people learn new languages when they move states or countries, sign language should be embraced in the same way.

That moment gave me hope. From then on, every Saturday evening, Geeta's daughter and I taught sign language on that same bench. The teenage boy brought his friends, and slowly, more people began joining us. What started as 3 students soon became 25. The beauty of community is that even a public park can become a place for growth and connection.

We never charged a fee. We taught for free, and it became the highlight of my week.

But life has its own way of throwing challenges. My job had a six-year contract limit—and mine was coming to an end. It was my only source of income. When the contract ended, I had nowhere to go.

I spent the next four months unemployed, barely surviving. I starved myself to stretch the little savings I had. Sundays were my only meal—a small bowl of rice. The rest of the week, I lived on water. Though I considered going back home, I had come too far to give up. I was independent now, and I didn't want to depend on anyone.

My friends, especially Geeta, noticed. Without making me feel dependent, they supported me—offering me lunch, snacks, and company.

Each day was spent searching for a job. I became desperate. Still, I never stopped the Saturday classes. I even asked my students if they knew of any job openings. I told them about my situation, but times were tough, and opportunities were few.

During this period, I spent more time online. Facebook became a small escape from the stress of my job search.

It was the time when Facebook was booming. Everyone was sharing stories through posts, exchanging messages on Facebook Messenger, and reconnecting with old friends through friend requests. Just like that, with a single click on the blue tab, I accepted a friend request from Mr. Shalom—a Jewish man.

We quickly built a bond. I spent hours chatting with him, sharing life stories, and getting to know each other deeply. Eventually, I opened up about my living situation. It felt strange how a stranger became someone I could confide in without hesitation. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I told him everything.

One day, he messaged me asking if I could go to a Western Union Money Transfer center—a service where people could send and receive money. It was the first time I had ever heard of Western Union. He explained that once I visited the office and shared my details, I'd receive the money he had sent. At first, I hesitated. My conscience didn't allow me to depend on anyone. But my circumstances left me with no other option.

Soon, our online friendship turned into an offline meeting. He was coming to Delhi for work, and we decided to meet at the park where I taught sign language—a public place, which felt safer. I sat on a bench, nervously fidgeting with my nails, when someone tapped my shoulder. I turned and breathed a sigh of relief. He was exactly like his profile picture.

Time flew until a park attendant reminded us it was closing time. We walked to a nearby tea stall, sipping hot masala chai, when he suddenly dropped a bomb—he told me he liked me and was interested in marrying me. I was taken aback. I had never seen him that way and thought of him only as a friend—perhaps even a savior. It was a strange moment until he reassured me that he didn't expect an answer immediately. He just wanted to be honest because, according to him, trust was the foundation of any relationship. I smiled and nodded without giving a yes or no. He sensed my discomfort and quickly changed the topic to his work.

Mr. Shalom worked at the United Nations. It was the first time I had heard of the organization, and I was intrigued by its mission to address global issues. I bombarded him with questions. When we said goodbye, I couldn't stop thinking about our conversation. I had a new dream—to work at the UN and make a difference in the deaf community, not just locally but globally. I messaged him asking if he could help me get a job there. He replied within seconds, saying he would try. That night, I went to bed dreaming of a future I had never dared to imagine before.

I shared this dream with my friends. They quickly dismissed it, saying getting a job at the UN was no joke—especially for someone without a basic degree. My dream felt shattered. But something inside told me not to give up just yet. I held onto hope.

Days passed, and I fell seriously ill. I had a persistent fever that worsened with each paracetamol. Luckily, Mr. Shalom was in town for another UN conference and came to see me. Alarmed by my condition, he rushed me to the hospital. I kept telling him I couldn't afford it and begged him not to admit me. He ignored me and admitted me anyway. I was diagnosed with dengue.

My platelet count dropped, and I had to be transfused. Hospitals were running short on platelets due to the dengue season, but he used all his contacts to find what I needed. On the sixth day, I finally began to recover. He had stayed by my side the entire time and paid all the medical bills. I felt guilty for being completely dependent on him. I promised I'd pay him back someday—not just the money, but for saving my life.

One Thursday morning, while heating a slice of bread, my phone vibrated with a call. Unable to answer it, I video-called my friend Geeta and gave her the number. She returned my call ten minutes later and said it was from the United Nations. I had been called for an interview the very next day.

The bread dropped from my hand. I stood frozen in disbelief. I called Mr. Shalom and, with tears in my eyes, kept thanking him. He asked why I was thanking him, and I told him about the interview. His response was, "Rupmani, I told you things would fall into place. You had the courage to hold on to your dream—now it's your time to make a difference. After all you've been through, things will only get better. You deserve this."

I asked Geeta if she and her daughter could accompany me the next day. They gladly agreed.

That Friday, I wore my best dress, applied light makeup, and headed to the interview. At the gate, the security guard stopped us, questioning our visit. Geeta explained, but he wouldn't let us in. She called the person who had contacted me, and he arrived to escort us, apologizing for the inconvenience—it was a matter of security, after all.

We were led to a conference room and offered tea and biscuits. Soon, a man and a woman walked in smiling, carrying a large brown file. Geeta introduced me and explained my mission to support the deaf community, my work in sign language, and my volunteering at the church. To my surprise, the woman knew sign language and began the interview by commending my efforts.

She asked if I knew ASL—American Sign Language—as it was the basic mode of communication at the UN. She explained that I'd be associated with the French team, who used ASL and that I'd need to familiarize myself with it. That was the first time I learned there were different types of sign languages. The interview lasted about an hour. They asked me to learn ASL and said they would be in touch.

Geeta and I met our friends for lunch and shared the interview experience. They told me not to get my hopes up—UN jobs were incredibly hard to get, and interviewers often say they'll call but never do. I agreed with them on one point—that I needed to find a job—but I didn't let go of my dream.

I now had two goals: to get a job and to learn ASL.

I reached out to everyone I knew—students from my deaf community, NDS (Noida Deaf Society), friends—but no one had heard of ASL. So, like many others, I turned to YouTube. I watched countless videos, took notes, and practiced every day.

Two months passed. No job. No call. My landlord, understanding my situation, let me stay rent-free. I had officially hit rock bottom—until one Tuesday morning changed everything.

At 9 a.m., I got a video call from the same UN contact. He told me I had been selected and had to return for a medical check-up and to sign up as an employee of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

I had a new identity: a representative of the deaf community for one of the world's most prestigious organizations.

After the medical check-up, I met the interviewer again. She asked if I had learned ASL. I nodded—my hard work had paid off. They informed me that my posting would be in Ukraine. Before confirmation, I had to record a Video Relay Service (VRS) introduction for the unit there.

That video was the stepping stone to the next chapter of my life. It was wartime in Ukraine, and my friends were worried. But I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. I took a leap of faith and flew to Ukraine.

My time in post-war Ukraine gave me clarity. I had the experience, confidence, and vision to build an ecosystem for the deaf community in my own country. In India, awareness around sign language was close to nothing. It was time to change that.

I returned home—on a mission, with a plan in place.

But before moving to another country, I have to take you back to the time when I got my passport. It was right after my divorce. I had no legal document to prove that I was a citizen of India, so I decided it was time to get my passport. My friends warned me that getting one wouldn't be easy, especially since I couldn't apply in Delhi. I had to go back to Darjeeling, my hometown, to complete the process.

This made me extremely nervous because it would be my first time returning in 10 years. The guilt of how I had betrayed my family, the pain caused by my ex-husband, and the immaturity of my past decisions that led to the difficult life I was now living—

all of it overwhelmed me. But I decided to face my thoughts and feelings and just go get the passport, because it was the first step towards my new identity.

I went to Darjeeling and met the passport official. A few major documents were required for the application, including my rental agreement for proof of address, a No Objection Certificate (NOC) and an Experience Certificate from my employer, and my bank statement. I was able to arrange the rental agreement and bank statement easily, but getting the NOC from my company was a bit difficult. At the time, I was a program associate at an NGO. Initially, they told me that because it was a contract role, it wasn't possible to issue such a certificate. But I pleaded with them, explaining that this was my only chance and all my other documents were in place—this was the only one left. I tried my best to convince them, and finally, they agreed to issue the certificate.

During the interview at the passport office, they asked me why I had moved to Delhi. I shared a brief version of my story and told them that Delhi was now my second home—it had been 10 years since I moved there and started a new life.

The interviewer stamped my application and informed me that it was under process. I was told to return home, as there would be a police verification at my rental address.

I came back to Delhi and waited. One fine day, the doorbell rang. I opened the door to find two police officers standing there for the verification. I offered them tea, but they looked suspicious and acted as if I wasn't living there legitimately. I had lost my job just a few weeks earlier, and I could sense that they were expecting a bribe. I excused myself, went to my neighbour, and borrowed ₹500 from her. I handed it to the officers, and they smiled, nodding in assurance that the police verification was complete and that I would soon receive my passport by courier.

It had been such a tough morning. As soon as they left, I knocked on my neighbour's door to thank her for the money and promised to repay her soon. That evening, I met Geeta and shared the whole incident with her. She immediately offered me ₹500 to return to my neighbour. I was so grateful—I hugged her and rushed back home. Knocking on my neighbour's door for the third time that day, I smiled as I returned the money. She told me it wasn't urgent, but I didn't want to owe anyone anything. I was just happy I could repay her.

When it came to Geeta, though, I owed her far more than money. She was the reason I had been able to survive for so long. She had become such an important part of my life, and no matter where life takes me, I will always be grateful to her.

Although the job at the United Nations was almost final, I faced some backlash from my social circle. They told me things like: "Since you're only 12th pass and not a graduate, don't get your hopes up. A world-renowned organization like the UN wouldn't choose someone with just a school certificate to represent them."

Despite this, I visited the UN office again and was informed that I had to move to Ukraine as soon as possible. Two things were happening simultaneously before I left: on one hand, I was packing my limited belongings, moving out of my rented apartment, and preparing my documents; on the other hand, I was giving interviews.

Word spread quickly — a deaf girl from a small village in the Northeast was representing India at the United Nations as an advocate for the deaf community.

As I bid goodbye to my life in Delhi, Geeta and my friends came to see me off at the airport. Geeta kept explaining everything about check-in, immigration, and travel procedures. At one point, I stopped her, hugged her tightly, and we both cried. It was a

painful moment — but I was also excited. I was about to begin a new chapter of my life.

When I landed in Ukraine, I quickly realized my problems hadn't stayed behind in India — they had followed me. I couldn't communicate with the immigration officer, who didn't seem convinced by my documents, even though everything was in order: an invitation letter from the UN, my paperwork neatly filed, everything ready.

But the story began on a rough note.

My luggage was taken, and I was made to sit in the customs office. The officers moved about in conversation, while I sat there silently, like a statue. They didn't allow me to use my phone. I begged for at least one phone call. After about two hours, they returned my phone. I immediately connected to the airport Wi-Fi and called the UN representative in Ukraine. He told me to stay put — he was on his way.

Two men arrived with a police officer. They were furious and started yelling at the officials who had detained me. Immediately, I was apologized to and moved to the VIP line.

I followed the UN representative in complete shock. Just moments ago, I was treated like a criminal — now I was in the VIP line, under police protection? It all felt surreal.

But I was relieved. Those two hours had been a test — a trick the universe played to see if I was truly determined to pursue my dream. I had passed. It was now my time to shine.

They dropped me at a hotel and helped me settle in. They apologized one last time and told me someone would come to pick me up at 10 AM the next day to take me to the office.

I collapsed onto the bed, completely jet-lagged and exhausted, and dozed off in the same clothes. It was already dark when I woke up. I freshened up and went to the restaurant for dinner.

As I waited, I noticed that everyone around had stern expressions. No one smiled. I focused on my meal, with thoughts of what my job might be playing in the back of my mind.

I assumed my job would be something like a peon or housekeeper — cleaning, running errands, etc. When I asked for the bill, I was told it was already taken care of.

I was surprised. Why would the UN pay for a peon's dinner?

I shrugged off the thought and returned to my room to prepare for the next day.

At 10 AM sharp, the same representative arrived and took me to an office outside the city — a 45-minute drive with a scenic view.

At the office, the General Secretary personally welcomed me and gave me a tour. At the end of it, they led me to a cabin. On the door was a silver nameplate — with **my name on it**.

It was my office.

There was a large desk, a glass window overlooking vast fields, a sofa set, and a nameplate on my desk — along with a brand-new laptop.

They told me, "This is your workspace."

That's when it hit me: from this little square room, I was going to begin my mission.

The challenges were immediate and intense. I couldn't communicate with anyone — no one understood my sign language. Even basic things were difficult.

I met the General Secretary and explained my situation. He told me that sign language varies from country to country, just like spoken languages have different accents and dialects.

My knowledge of ASL (American Sign Language) became invaluable, but I needed a new strategy.

Our first step was to introduce a **Standard International Sign Language (ISL)**. We began building a course and spent the next six weeks focused on it.

In parallel, I attended several conferences, learning the UK sign language often used there. I worked as a deaf interpreter and collaborated with various UN bodies – OHCHR, UNICEF, and UNHCR.

But beyond work, I made amazing friends. My colleagues and I spent a lot of time together, and I experienced things I'd never imagined.

Weekends were fun-filled. I fell in love with Ukrainian culture, food, and – most of all – the women. Despite the extreme cold (Ukraine has 2 months of summer and 10 months of winter!), the women dressed beautifully – in shorts, heels, and makeup.

They looked stunning. That's when I tried makeup for the first time. My friends gave me a makeover. I wore heels and makeup to my first party.

But as we walked to the pub, I slipped on the ice and landed flat on my bum. Everyone laughed, helped me up, and said, "Walking in heels on ice is a skill – you'll get it soon!"

The party was loud. Music, dancing, and drinks.

We were a group of seven, and seven vodka shots were ordered. I shook my head and said no – I had never had alcohol before. But they cheered me on, and I took my first shot.

My bitter expression made everyone laugh. "Just the beginning," they said.

By the fourth shot, the room was spinning. I was dizzy. The alcohol hit me hard – I had never been drunk before, and Ukrainian vodka is strong.

While my friends danced, I sat, mesmerized. Maybe it was the alcohol, but I found Ukrainians to be incredibly beautiful — their skin, their features, the way they walked.

But one thing stood out: **no one smiled.**

When my friend came to check on me, I asked her, “Why doesn’t anyone smile here?”

She sighed and told me about the 2014 war.

The war had broken the country — people had lost homes, families, limbs, lives. The trauma was shared, and so was the pain.

She told me I had been brought to Ukraine for a reason — to help those who had become deaf due to the war. The last sound they heard was the sound of bombs.

I broke down in tears. I ran to the restroom and threw up everything.

Eventually, I passed out. My friends got me back to my room. Apparently, I’d puked everywhere. When I woke up, one of them stood beside my bed with water and aspirin.

Like every blackout, I asked, “What happened last night?”

She gave me a flashback. I was stunned.

If I had been in India, drinking as a woman would’ve been judged harshly. That night would’ve ended in shame. But here I was — cleaned up, comforted, and unjudged.

I hugged her and thanked her for being there.

She smiled and said, “That’s what friends are for. But next time, **just two shots!**”

I laughed and said, “Lesson learned — the hard way.”

Whenever I needed anything, I used sign language with my friends, and they always helped.

Once, I had written the name of a café on a piece of paper and showed it to a cab driver. GPS wasn't available back then, so I had no way to check the route.

He dropped me in a shady area filled with prostitutes. I was uncomfortable.

I showed him the paper again, signing that I wanted a **café**, not this place. He finally understood and took me to the right place.

My friends later explained that the café and the red-light district had **the same name**.

I also told them how uncomfortable I felt. That's when they gently explained: prostitution was a **means of survival** for many women there. I shouldn't judge their character based on their job.

That was a turning point. I realized I wasn't just from a conservative background — I had been **narrow-minded** too.

My friends helped me see the world differently. I began to think outside the box. As they say, "**Don't judge a book by its cover.**" I adopted that mindset — and it made me a better person.

In 2017, I officially joined the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) office. After learning that over 300 people had been left disabled by the war, I was heartbroken.

Alongside our work on International Sign Language, I decided to do more for the Ukrainian people.

We began by conducting a census — we found 3,500 deaf individuals. There were two main groups to work with: the soldiers and the civilians.

The soldiers had access to physical and psychological care — but the civilians didn't, even though they too had lost everything.

It was unfair.

I proposed a plan to the General Secretary to treat all victims equally. Initially, it wasn't approved, but I kept pitching new ideas until they finally agreed.

We launched the mission — bringing together businessmen, journalists, teachers, builders — and formed a strong community to support each other.

Many wanted to leave Ukraine, but we reminded them: this is your homeland. We gave them hope.

It was only a matter of time before we rebuilt the nation.

In India, for every 18 million people, there were only **100 interpreters**. That's 1 interpreter for every 180,000 people.

In contrast, Ukraine had 2 million deaf individuals and **50,000 interpreters**. That was a huge achievement.

In 2016, India officially launched ISL courses. The Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre was established, offering training for interpreters.

India had now joined the **global mission** to empower the deaf community.

Transition Across Europe

I began my global journey in Eastern Europe, in Ukraine. I continued my work there with the deaf community, becoming part of various organizations that organized numerous events and activities—such as dance, art workshops, theatre, and more—to bring deaf individuals together. We also hosted the Sports Olympics for Persons with Disabilities (PWD), where people who were blind, physically challenged, deaf, mute, and others came together to showcase their athletic spirit. This inspired many and helped them believe they could live lives beyond the label of being "disabled."

From Ukraine, I traveled to Central Europe – Germany, my second stop.

Germans were quite different from Ukrainians in terms of culture and communication. I joined the UN headquarters there and presented a summary of my work in Ukraine, including my involvement in developing International Sign Language (ISL), supporting war victims who had acquired disabilities, and contributing to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for the deaf community.

Just like I had struggled with sign language when I moved to Ukraine from India, I faced a similar challenge in Germany. Their sign language dialect was entirely different. I had to learn to communicate with my colleagues and advocate for integrating ISL to unify the global deaf community.

From Germany, I traveled back to Ukraine and then onward to the heart of Central Europe – Budapest, Hungary.

There, I attended my first convention organized by the World Deaf Federation, representing the American branch of the United Nations. It was one of the most eye-opening events I had ever experienced. The convention was vibrant—with stalls from different countries, ongoing activities, and conferences—all conducted in ISL. While the voices were silent, the message to the deaf community was loud and clear.

I met interpreters from around the world, and despite our differing dialects, we communicated, adapted, and learned from one another. Their stories and techniques inspired me deeply and shaped my resolve to continue working for the deaf community upon my return to India.

From Central Europe, I journeyed north to the Scandinavian country of Sweden.

Sweden inspired me more than any other country. The Swedish people recognized me from my viral videos and acknowledged my work. I wasn't just seen as a UN representative, but as someone who had genuinely contributed to the deaf community. Their hospitality touched my heart—they refused to let me stay in a hotel and instead invited me into their homes, making me feel like part of their families.

One experience there led to a groundbreaking idea for my dream project: Sweden's Video Relay Service (VRS). This government program enabled deaf individuals to access emergency services via video calls. For most deaf people, accessing help in emergencies—such as calling the police, fire department, or ambulance—was a major obstacle. But through VRS, a deaf person could video call an interpreter who would relay their needs to emergency responders.

I witnessed a call where a man with severe stomach pain and diarrhea used the service to contact a doctor. A nurse was immediately dispatched to his home with medication. This simple yet life-saving accessibility left a lasting impression on me.

Sadly, in India, such a service had not even been conceptualized. Sweden's standard of living and the benefits provided by its government—from paid maternity leave to stipends for interns—are examples the world should follow. Citizens, in turn, supported each other and the system, leading to lower crime rates and a more peaceful society.

After witnessing the hardship and trauma faced by Ukrainians in the aftermath of war, Sweden was a refreshing contrast—a place where both the government and the people worked harmoniously.

Ukraine, Germany, Hungary, and Sweden.

Each country had its unique culture, people, currency, and — most challengingly for me — their own sign language dialects. Learning all these dialects was a difficult yet enriching experience.

My final stop was in Western Europe — London, the capital of the United Kingdom.

I had to wrap things up in Ukraine before moving to London. The UN team assisted with my visa process, and leaving Ukraine was emotional. The country had taught me so much — not just about the deaf community and ISL, but about cultural diversity, friendship, and the depth of human connection. I left with a diary full of learnings and memories, ready to bring them to life through my dream project.

Upon arriving at Heathrow Airport, for a moment, I thought I had landed in India! I expected to see mostly white British people, but instead, there were more brown faces than I'd seen anywhere else in Europe. It was like a little India.

I soon learned that many Indians had migrated to the UK for work and education. Indian restaurants, grocery stores, and even Bollywood posters were everywhere. I had my first paratha and curry in over 1.5 years, which reminded me of Delhi. I immediately video-called Geeta in excitement, forgetting it was midnight in India. She answered, alarmed at first, but soon joined in my excitement and explained how Indians were now recognized globally for their intelligence and work ethic.

However, I soon faced a serious challenge.

At work, I tried to communicate using ISL but was ignored. I felt unwelcome. An Indian colleague explained that the British were quite conservative about their language and that I would need to learn British Sign Language (BSL) to be accepted.

Television became my teacher. Every morning at 7 AM, as I had my coffee, I watched a news channel with a BSL interpreter and subtitles. Slowly, I picked up the basics. As I started using BSL, I was welcomed – both professionally and socially. I joined a deaf community group that met every fourth Saturday, where I made many friends and continued improving my BSL skills.

At work, I gently began advocating for the importance of ISL, explaining that BSL was limited to the UK. When people traveled abroad, they faced difficulties due to the lack of a universal sign language.

For example:

To say “My Name is”

- In ISL: Two fingers across the forehead
- In BSL: Two fingers across the left chest (where we typically pin a name tag)

These small differences matter. Without a common language, deaf individuals often struggle in unfamiliar countries.

Back to India – 2018

After six months in London and two years in Europe, I finally returned to India in 2018.

But Delhi was no longer the city I remembered. It felt more polluted, more crowded, and far more chaotic compared to the green landscapes, blue skies, and calm I had enjoyed abroad. What I missed most was the fresh air.

I was excited to meet my friends. I had brought them chocolates, keychains, and magnets, and they were thrilled as I shared my Europe stories. Curious about the sudden change in Delhi’s environment, I asked them what had happened. They explained that much of the pollution came from the burning of crop residue by farmers in Haryana. It was heartwarming to reconnect with

everyone, especially Geeta and her daughter, who, to my surprise, had grown into a young woman.

Since I had officially resigned from the UN, I needed to start looking for work again. Delhi seemed perfectly content to keep me jobless, but I didn't lose hope. I was searching for someone who could help turn my dream into reality. First, though, I needed a job.

I soon found an opportunity in Bangalore at SignLab, an organisation that teaches sign language door-to-door. I worked there for four months, but deep down I knew my purpose was bigger than just teaching.

One day, I attended a convention for people with disabilities. That was where I met my role model, Mr. Tarun Sarwal from Enable Makeathon—an initiative by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in New Delhi—for the second time.

Enable Makeathon was a unique social movement in humanitarian action, disability innovation, entrepreneurship, and technology. They aimed to crowdsource innovative solutions for people with disabilities, especially those with long-neglected needs.

The Conversation That Changed My Life

Tarun and I communicated through an interpreter, and the conversation went like this:

Me: “It’s very nice to meet you. I see your organisation does a lot for people with disabilities. I’m Rupmani, and I am deaf. I worked with the United Nations and learned many dialects of sign language during my time in Europe. There, I saw how easily accessible services for the deaf were—whether in emergencies, healthcare, sports, or community activities. I read about your work and wondered if we could collaborate to build a platform for the deaf.”

Tarun: “Let’s meet for an official interview sometime this week. But first, what exactly is your idea?”

Me: “There are 18 million deaf people in India, yet most don’t have access to sign language or opportunities to learn it. There’s also a huge stigma attached to being deaf, and the number of interpreters is very low.”

Tarun: “So, how do you want to go about it? Do you have a plan?”

Me: “My idea is based on the CHABLA app used in Europe. But it’s built on software that isn’t practical for India – it’s expensive and not user-friendly. I want to create a similar app using Indian technology, making it more affordable, adding better features, and ensuring it’s easy to use.”

Tarun: “This is very interesting. Let’s sit down next week and discuss further. I’ll confirm the date, time, and place. It was very nice connecting with you, Ms. Rupmani. Let’s make a difference together.”

I could hardly believe what had just happened. I rushed to the restroom and did a little happy dance – my dream was finally in motion! It felt like one of the biggest milestones of my life.

* * * * *

Around this time, my health started giving me trouble. I had severe stomach aches on and off, and my menstrual cycle was completely irregular. After running tests, the doctor confirmed that I had hypothyroidism. I didn’t understand much. Thankfully, Tarun accompanied me for the follow-up visit. We communicated by text, and he was shocked that I hadn’t known about this condition for a long time. I explained that I couldn’t afford an interpreter because I had been out of work for months, and that I really needed access to VRS (Video Relay Service).

VRS is essential for the deaf—for medical help, daily communication, and even simple things like buying something from a shop. But the problem was that India had very few VRS centres, and the existing ones were extremely expensive. It was impossible for the common person to use them.

That was when Tarun truly understood the importance of my project. He immediately agreed to support building the application—not just for the deaf but also for caregivers and families. He became the backbone of the entire project, providing the funding we needed to bring it to life.

* * * * *

Building the Dream

The following Tuesday, Tarun and I met at a café. He brought along another colleague, and together we began creating the blueprint—the foundation of the app. I arranged for an interpreter, and the discussion went on for hours. We decided to hold a workshop for the deaf to gather real-world insights.

It was a small workshop with 20 deaf participants. We asked questions like, “What do you need from an app?” and “How would an app like this help you?” Their feedback helped shape the design.

Next, we met the technical team to begin building. But first, the app needed a name. Since the idea was mine, Tarun insisted that I should name it. After some thought, I chose:

SIGNABLE – Communicate with anyone, anywhere, anytime.

Then came the logo. Since the app was for the deaf community, I suggested organising an art competition for deaf artists. Around 20–25 people participated. I explained the theme of the app and what the logo should represent. We shortlisted the top two designs—the first-place winner was from Delhi, and the second from Jaipur. And with that, we finally had our logo.



Launching Signable

On 19 July 2019, we officially launched Signable. It was a visual-based app, designed for users who primarily communicated through sign language. Although still in the testing phase, it became the first app of its kind in India for the deaf community, with our base in Bangalore.

Soon, someone shared the app with a person in Tamil Nadu, and suddenly we were flooded with calls—hundreds of them—with only two interpreters to manage everything. Since the app was still in testing, it was free, but these calls gave us invaluable feedback. One major suggestion was to add translations of English content into regional languages.

The Covid Years

March 2020 brought the Covid-19 pandemic.

I wanted to pause operations because the whole world was in crisis, but Tarun insisted that we keep going. We were handling 1,000–2,000 calls per day. The interpreters worked in shifts, but the calls never stopped. We had no external funding; Tarun personally sponsored the salaries and all operational expenses. We continued offering all services for free, and it became financially draining.

We added a new Customer Support Wing specifically to provide Covid-related information via video calls and tried to reach even rural parts of India.

For two years, we ran solely on Tarun's support. But the impact was undeniable—the deaf community shared countless

heartwarming stories of how Signable helped them during emergencies, hospital visits, job interviews, and more.

After two years and a few months, we realised we needed financial sustainability. We introduced a minimal charge, but the deaf community protested. They accused us of turning a free service into a money-making tactic.

I stood firm. Not only did I feel guilty depending entirely on Tarun, but Signable needed growth, investors, and financial structure.

I tried organising fundraisers but had little luck. The community still refused to pay, and eventually, we took a six-month break.

But during those months, many deaf individuals reached out, urging us to relaunch the app—they were struggling without it. That was when they truly understood Signable's value.

A New Beginning

We relaunched, and I officially became the CEO. We fixed a charge of ₹75 per call. I was heavily criticised, people called me greedy and accused me of trying to make money off the community.

But their negativity didn't affect me. I realised what I had overcome to reach that point. Tarun supported me and trusted my decisions.

Just as things were beginning to stabilise, a tragedy struck my personal life. I became acquainted with a man who seemed kind. He shared his goals and problems with me, and since relationships are about give and take, I shared my life—including my finances.

He fabricated a story and asked me for money. I trusted him, gave him my savings, believing he would return it with interest. But life isn't always roses—he disappeared with the money.

The aftermath was terrible. People using Signable started accusing me of corruption, money laundering, and much more.

I needed to get my life back on track, so I took a three-month break from Signable. Tarun stood by me, helped me file an FIR, found me a good advocate, and we took the case to court. By God's grace, we won. That cleared my name. Once it became a legal matter, people realised I was the victim, not the culprit.

This gave me the strength to return to Signable. It was time to stay committed to my dream and remember my purpose. I had decided to dedicate my life to making a difference in the deaf community—and now I was ready to continue that mission.

Testimonial

Ambika Chettri – Rupmani’s Sister

Rupmani—my rock, my guiding light, my beloved sister. Your life is a testament to the power of unwavering determination and unrelenting passion. From our childhood days, I witnessed your boundless spirit, your refusal to be constrained by societal norms, and your courage to forge your own path. Your dreams were never mere fantasies; they were a blueprint for the life you were destined to live.



As your younger sister and confidante, I have had the privilege of watching you shatter barriers and defy expectations. Your journey has been a constant source of inspiration for me—a reminder that with focus and perseverance, we can achieve anything we set our minds to.

Your strength in the face of adversity is a beacon of hope for all who know you. Despite the hurdles you faced, you never allowed your disability to define you. Instead, you transformed it into a catalyst, pushing beyond boundaries and achieving greatness. Your resilience is a powerful testament to the human spirit’s ability to overcome even the most daunting challenges.

As the firstborn, you embraced responsibility with grace and humility, proving yourself to be a pillar of strength for our family. Your journey towards independence has been a journey of empowerment for all of us. You have shown us that with hard work and determination, anything is possible.

Your autobiography is not just the story of your life; it is a roadmap for anyone who dares to dream big. It reminds us that life may not be easy, but it is in moments of struggle that we discover our true potential. Rupmani, your story will inspire countless hearts, and I am honored to be a part of your journey.

Here's to you, dear sister—a shining example of what it means to live life on your own terms and leave an indelible mark on the world.

* * * * *

Geeta Sharma



I first met Rupmani Chhetri at a Deaf Women's Conference in 2009. At that time, she was very quiet, gentle, and humble. She was still discovering herself and had not yet been exposed to deaf culture, women's empowerment, or leadership. I remember her as someone who listened more than she spoke, with a heart full of potential.

In those early days, I supported her in small but meaningful ways—guiding her toward strong life values, positive behaviour, and helping her build confidence and skills. However, what truly shaped her journey was not only guidance from others but her own strong self-motivation, courage, and determination.

Through many struggles, learning experiences, and challenges, Rupmani chose a powerful path: to work for deaf women and deaf youth. Step by step, she transformed her life. She never gave up. She learned, grew, and stood tall, even when the road was difficult.

Today, Rupmani Chhetri shines like a star. Her life has changed completely. She is now a respected and well-known role model

in the Indian Deaf community. Many deaf people know her name, follow her work, and feel inspired by her journey. She proves that deaf people can rise, lead, and turn their dreams into reality.

Her journey is truly beautiful, powerful, and successful. I always pray for her continued growth and success, and I feel deeply proud to have been a small part of her life journey.

I would also like to share how Rupmani supported my daughter, Sarah Sharma, who worked with her as an ISL interpreter for the Green Park ISL sessions. Whenever Rupmani needed support, my daughter stood beside her as an interpreter. Through this journey, my daughter also grew.

In the beginning, she had limited financial support and opportunities, but Rupmani trusted her and gave her important platforms – Parliament conferences, UNDP conferences, NGO meetings, and disability conferences.

Today, Rupmani has become a star, and my daughter has grown into a professional interpreter. This mutual growth reflects Rupmani's generosity, leadership, and deep belief in empowering others.

Rupmani Chhetri's life is not just a success story – it is a source of hope, strength, and inspiration for many. I will always respect her journey and pray for her continued success.

* * * * *

Tarun Sarwal

The Rupmani I Know

I don't remember who introduced Rupmani to me, but there she was—standing in front of me—only a few days after we had begun discussing the idea of starting the SignAble company. She had an open face, always laughing and smiling, and within minutes, I realised that, despite any shyness I might have felt, we were going to communicate in sign language.



Of course, at that time, I did not know a single sign.

She taught me how to say hello, asked if I was all right, helped me sign my name and hers, and, of course, created a sign name for me. It is difficult to explain how profoundly this opened up a new world for me—one that I began to explore with Rupmani's patient guidance. I was already familiar with the principle of disability inclusion, *"Nothing for us without us,"* but through Rupmani, I learned how deeply honest and uncompromising that principle truly is.

Rupmani is an exceptional convener and organiser. Over the following months—and then years—as we developed our ideas, our first product, the technology, and the user experience, she consistently insisted on placing deaf people at the centre of every decision. Even the SignAble logo was created through a crowdsourced design call within the deaf community. Once the designs were received, they were shortlisted and ultimately voted on by the deaf community themselves. As a newcomer to the deaf world, how could I have known about the extraordinary graphic and visual skills so many deaf people possess?

Through Rupmani, I began to understand deaf culture—a vast subculture with its own ways of being, communicating, and

supporting one another. Hearing people may define the mainstream world, but they often ignore the deaf, never learn sign language, and continue to view deaf people as “dumb.” As a result, deaf people build rich lives of their own, with distinct likes, dislikes, and strong systems of mutual support, all forged in the shadow of persistent marginalisation.

As I learned Rupmani’s story – the hardships she faced at home and in school, being left to fend for herself and work to survive – I realised that her experiences mirrored those of many deaf people in India. Through her, I also began meeting and employing many deaf individuals. What stood out most about Rupmani, however, was her extraordinary positivity, her constant desire to learn, her uncanny instinct for understanding what people truly felt, her ability to find solutions, and her remarkable capacity to forgive – again and again.

Deaf people come from all backgrounds. Some are born into families with resources and support. Rupmani had none. She was unschooled and did not even know that other deaf people existed until her late teens. And yet, she reached where she did. I was certainly not the first to notice this. She was selected as a disability officer by the United Nations and went on to work in Ukraine and other countries.

I am deeply grateful that Rupmani was the one person who refused to communicate with me in anything other than sign language, forcing me to learn. When I didn’t know the signs, I would text her, but when she replied, nothing made sense to me. Like many deaf people in India, she had limited literacy at the time. Then one day, I received a long, nuanced reply to one of my questions. I assumed someone had helped her – but no. She had found a way, before anyone else I knew, to use AI to support her writing. Today, I receive detailed emails from her discussing the future of the company and the expansion of SignAble into new countries.

Rupmani has been the true spirit behind SignAble—the person who inspired, battled, pushed, persuaded, and navigated people and events to build this platform, enabling thousands to use SignAble’s live interpretation services. I have witnessed some of the calls while monitoring quality, and they still leave me emotionally shaken. When a mother hears her daughter “speak” through an interpreter for the first time, it is overwhelming—a lifetime of unspoken and unheard words suddenly released. In those moments, hearing people finally understand that deaf people are just like them. When that barrier falls and communication flows, I am profoundly grateful to Rupmani.

Sometimes people criticise Rupmani. They argue with her or complain—both internally and externally. While I may occasionally point out that she has gone too far or has been too harsh, I always stand by her. I know she carries that silent scream—the longing to be heard, and the determination to ensure that *all* deaf people are heard. That is what drives her.

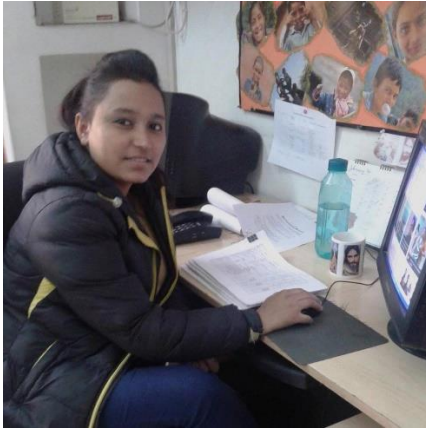
Many people have come and gone at SignAble, and we have weathered many ups and downs. But I know this: SignAble is not just a company for Rupmani—it is one of her homes.

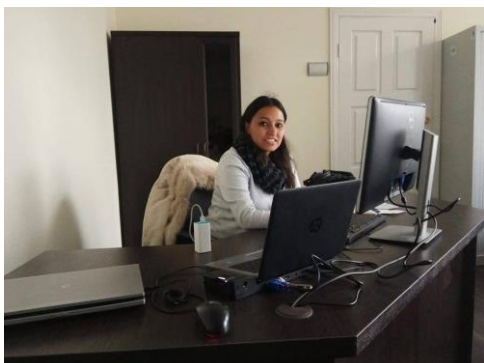
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My Journey through the Years













Az Sign Language

