

**Presidential address of Dr. Prathibha Karanth delivered on
1st January, 2015 at 47th ISHACON at Manipal**

Prof Valiathan, Prof Rangasayee, Members of the Organizing Committee and other office bearers of ISHA, Fellow Members of the Indian Speech Language and Hearing Association.

Greetings for the New Year and all good wishes for a Great beginning in 2015

It gives me particular pleasure to be able to deliver this presidential address on this New Year's day – a time when we reflect on the past, take stock and make resolutions for strengthening that which has stood the test of time and that which needs to be done, in order that we may become even stronger and fulfill to a greater extent the needs and aspirations of those that we are here for and for ourselves. And this I have chosen as the theme for this presidential address.

50 years, or nearly there! Every ISHACON is also a personal milestone for me as it coincides with the number of years since I stepped in to the profession as a student. Today I'd like to look back at these 47 years both from the viewpoint of the larger profession and my own career and reflect on what was, what is, what could have been and what should be.

Professional training, clinical services and research are the universally stated objectives of both our national organizations such as ISHA and our national institutions. We have been proud of our training programs, with some justification, comprehensive, as they have been, despite or perhaps because of the small numbers. The delivery of the clinical services on the other hand deserves a closer look and the numbers trained as well as the levels of training that we offer, are undoubtedly linked to the extent and quality of service delivery.

The numbers of individuals that need our services in the country vary depending on the source of information and the figures have varied considerably. Nevertheless it is clear that 25 to 35 % of all those with disabilities need our services. With the growing recognition and recent inclusion of Learning Disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorders as diagnostic categories of developmental disabilities, that require communication intervention services this proportion and the overall numbers of the clientele dependent on our services are enormous. In addition with the growing awareness of the need for our services, the search and demand for evidence based **quality services** with a measurable impact, have also risen in the public at large. All of this is also to be seen in the larger context of the crucial and increasing importance of precise and rapid communication in our modern technological society - a phenomenon that has and is increasingly making itself felt across several domains.

It is therefore incumbent upon us to look at our training programs and their impact not in isolation but in tandem with the clinical realities on ground. Despite the recent surge in the number of training colleges and trainees, the numbers of Speech & Hearing professionals trained in this country stand at about 5,500 to date. Of these less than 2500 are registered with ISHA and practice in the country, many of them in academic positions with a minimal service delivery component, largely restricted to a supervisory role.

A quick comparison with the United States (whom we emulate in most aspects of our professional development) is telling – The American Speech & Hearing Association as of date has over 1,50,000 members, over 90 % of whom are SLPs with the remaining being Audiologists or dual certificate holders serving a population of about 314 million. In contrast India with a population of over 1.2 billion, has about 2500 registered professionals with combined training in Audiology and Speech Language Pathology. In other words less than 1/75th the number of professionals serving the needs of a country with four times the population.

It is reported that according to one study (ASHA 2013) approximately 40 million Americans have communication disorders. Going by those figures, given that we have no reason to believe that the prevalence is any less in India, we could be having around 150 million with communication disorders. At the same time in 2013 the number of ASHA certified audiologists for every 1,00,000 residents was 4 and ASHA certified SLPs for every 1,00,000 residents was 45!

Further, we do not have the additional cadre of school based speech therapy assistants who have been in existence in the US since the 1970's, now recognized by ASHA as Associates. It is noteworthy that despite their sizable professional pool countries like the United States have felt the need for a robust ground level school based service. We have nothing comparable and given the very genuine need, unless we address the same, are at risk of other untrained personnel taking on this role.

The divide in numbers of those training in Audiology versus Speech Language Pathology also merits attention. This divide, with a very high proportion of SLPs to Audiologists is clearly linked to the man hour intensive nature of the practice of Speech Language Pathology which requires repetitive input over a prolonged period of time, as compared to the quicker, more diagnostic nature of the practice of Audiology.

One need not look further than these figures to appreciate the enormity of the lack of trained professionals in the country and its impact, or rather the lack of impact on clinical service delivery in the country. And I repeat, these figures have to be appreciated within the context of our emulation of western, in particular American models of training in Speech Language Pathology and Audiology. How our training programs feed in to and meet our clinical needs have been largely given a go by. At the same time considerations of other more specific, service delivery oriented programs are shunned in the interest of 'academic excellence'.

After nearly 5 decades of largely unchanged existence, it is perhaps time for us to review our discipline and its training programs, the clinical practice of it and its impact on ground within a more realistic framework of the needs of our country and its population and how best to address them in the quickest and most efficient manner; by thinking out of the box rather than by going with the given alone. These are days of INDIA MAKE. So why not a Speech Language & Hearing profession that is of 'India Make'.

As we look forward to coming year and the future, I hope that all of ISHA, its office bearers and members will take part in a larger vision of the well being of those we are trained to serve and look beyond our training being in our service.

Thank you and have a GREAT NEW YEAR.

Dr. Prathibha Karanth