

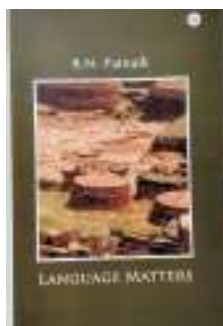
Book Review

Language Matters

Bhubaneswar: Dhaulti Books.(133 pages)

Patnaik, B. N. (2018).

Reviewed by: **Shreesh Choudhary**



This is an expert's book for lay people. Following the title of the first piece in this collection of 32 relatively short but thought-provoking notes on language, linguistics and communication, the book is, inter-alia, also an argument against the "Power of the Expert".

Professor Bibhudhendra Narayan Patnaik retired from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Kanpur in the early years of the new millennium. Before this, he studied first in Odisha, and then at CIFL, Hyderabad. Patnaik has occupied a number of important professional positions. He is a member of the Government of India's Committee for Classical Languages. He was a member of UGC's Committee for Indigenous Languages and of the IT Ministry's Working Committee for Technical Development of Indian Languages. He has been a member of the Board of Governors of IIT Kanpur, and he has taught English for over half a century. However, Patnaik is basically a researcher, who is interested in The Mahabharata, football, ghosts, computers and mind-brain, and in life and letters generally.

Patnaik is also interested in language and machine. In the 1970s and 1980s, when computers were still new in India, Patnaik, along with some colleagues from the field of Computer

Science, wrote a series of articles outlining issues in machine understanding and processing of languages, and in the form and extent of collaboration between experts looking at the same issues from different perspectives. Language after all is in, of and for the mind; and, grammar, or syntax, is the best view of how well-organized a "machine" mind may be. The notes under review in this book, therefore, are like mantras created through a lifetime of meditation.

The present collection of essays brings highly theoretical issues to lay people in a non-technical language, without using any jargon. A book of this kind has been long-awaited in the field of language education.

In the note on language and communication, the second in the volume, Patnaik claims that there may be moments when "Even Silence can be a mode of communication" (p.5). One can do many things with language besides communication. For instance, "...one could hurt with language and heal with language". One can use language to talk about past, present and the future, about health and happiness, about anything practically. A Greek Philosopher once said that anything that is human is not without language, but language can often be ambiguous. It can cause blocks in communication. Examples cited in support of this theory are new and interesting. But many of these notes could have been accompanied by illustrations from the writer's own experience. Personal touch would have gone so naturally with a book of this kind, but Patnaik has rarely done so. As a result, the book stops short of becoming as interesting as indicated.

Another well-written note entitled "Our Reliance on English", looks at how in the recent times, many English words have been added to Indian

languages and are now part of the local vocabulary. They are no longer seen as foreign words. Patnaik cites examples of words such as "decision, training, result, final, plot, powercut, information, etc.", which are now part of the Odia vocabulary. According to him, there is no point in trying to replace "result" with "phala" or "phalaaphal". There are many other instances where English words have been "nativized". However, Patnaik is worried about why people use words of a different language, when idiomatic alternatives in their own language are available (p.51).

There is another interesting article on "English Medium schools"(p.53). Mr. P. V. Narsimha Rao, former Prime Minister of India and an educationist, believed that it would take "not more than four hundred hours of good instruction and practice for one to have a reasonable command of English". Patnaik asserts that "This is not an unrealistic assessment (p.54)." He feels that people do not only want to know the English language, they also want their children to have good knowledge of subjects such as science, mathematics, social studies, etc., and develop alertness and self-confidence. Parents began looking for alternatives when they found that not just English, even these other subjects were not being taught properly in Odia medium schools. They moved their children to English medium schools, which "were the best alternatives available". Patnaik claims, "These schools were far better administered...." The syllabi were more modern, classes were generally held regularly, homework was given and checked, etc. The government schools were inadequately staffed, but the English medium schools had, on the whole, a good teacher student ratio. These schools also had better academic and recreational facilities. Furthermore, compulsory use of uniform generated self confidence among students. English language schools have thrived because people have given up on the Odia medium

government schools, which is quite true, says Patnaik.

Today there is legislation for many things which would earlier have been obvious. Today Indian children have a right to education. But that would be meaningful, Patnaik says, only "if there are schools in the true sense of the term...."(p. 55)

Similarly, Patnaik raises questions about education through the mother tongue. Is it possible for all, are regional languages of states in India mother tongue of all children there, how do we ensure the mother tongue education of children living outside "their" states?

For many children, 3-language formula can become the 4-language formula. Think of a Maithili-speaking child at school in Bhubaneswar. She will have to learn Oriya, Hindi and English, besides her mother tongue. So there are problems, but these are not insurmountable. There is no point blaming English, says Patnaik. It is not that English is responsible for the decline of output in Indian languages. English of course is no longer a foreign language in India, it is there on the Sahitya Akademy list of Indian languages. It is India's official language and, currently, it has a greater variety of books in knowledge generated in and through this language. We must, therefore, teach English to every child (P.79).

There are similar notes on cultural and linguistic issues. For instance, Patnaik asserts that a number of people criticize Chomsky without reading him. According to him, no other researcher brought as much philosophical attention to the study of language as Chomsky.

As mentioned earlier, the book could have been more interesting had the writer chosen to illustrate the points he makes with examples, events, anecdotes, etc., from his experience. Yet, on the whole, this collection has the potential to be every language teacher's handbook in India, and they could seek personal guidance from it

in times of doubt and confusion. *Language Matters* is a landmark book. It deserves a spectacular reception.

Shreesh Chaudhary retired as Professor of Linguistics from the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Chennai. He is currently working as a Distinguished Professor at the Institute of Applied Science & Humanities, GLA University, Mathura.

shreeshchaudhary@gmail.com