

Interviews

Andesha Mangla (AM) talks to Professor Madan Vasishtha (MV)

Professor Madan Vasishtha is a well-known and highly respected advocate for Indian Sign Language and bilingual deaf education. He completed his MA in Deaf Education and PhD in Special Education Administration from Gallaudet University, the only university for the Deaf in the world, after which he worked as a teacher and administrator at several schools for the deaf in the USA. He retired as superintendent of New Mexico School for the deaf in 2000. Until last year (2015), he was teaching at Gallaudet University. He was the chief advisor at IGNOU for starting Indian Sign Language Regional Training Centre. Currently, he is on a Fulbright fellowship and working on two books on deaf education. He has authored six books, and many articles and book chapters on deafness-related areas.

AM: Your book *Deaf in Delhi* describes how you lost your hearing at the age of 11 years and your experiences of growing up as a deaf person. Could you recapitulate some of those experiences here, focusing on your early education and some barriers that you faced?

MV: I was in the 6th grade at that time. No one thought about my continuing the class in the village school. I was allowed to appear for final examinations in March, however. For the 7th grade, I had to depend on Shyam, my elder brother, for books. I read each textbook diligently and asked for help with arithmetic when needed. I finished all the books in a couple of months and wondered why we take a whole year for each standard. I did not sit for the 7th grade examination or 8th either. I just kept learning from Shyam's books as he moved to the next grade.

Meanwhile, I was also working all day in the field. In the beginning I just herded cattle, but soon I was cutting grass in the jungle and hauling it to the *kudhi* (where cattle are kept), and milking water buffaloes and cows. By the time I was 16, I graduated to ploughing the fields.

At that time, *Babuji* (my father) suggested that I should appear as a private candidate to get my high school diploma. Students who lived in

remote areas, or those who could not attend school were allowed to take the examination along with regular students. I liked the idea and, once again, got Shyam's books and began to study at night.

I took the examinations in March 1957. I was 16 at that time, and a year behind my classmates. High school examinations were not hard and I got the first division despite the little work I did. I wanted to go to a college, but that was out of the question.

Instead of college, Babuji suggested, I appear for Prabhakar examination. I do not know if they still have those examinations. Prabhakar is equivalent to a B.A. in Hindi and Sanskrit. I studied hard and really enjoyed learning Sanskrit and literary criticism in a book by Hazari Prasad Dwivedi.

After Prabhakar, which I passed in 1958, I focused on farming, accepting the fact that I was going to be a farmer all my life. However, the start of a photography school for the deaf in Delhi changed it all.

What helped me was my habit of reading. I read whatever I could find. There was no library and I had to go to Hoshiarpur to buy books from a *raddiwala* at 1 rupee a kilogram. I found a lot of books in English and these helped me not only to improve my English skills, but also broaden my mind.

AM: You grew up as a deaf person during the 1950s and 60s with little access to resources. What do you think of the deaf education situation in India today?

MV: During the 1950-60s, there were perhaps 40 schools for the deaf in India. However, my parents and I did not know anything about it. When I moved to Delhi to learn photography, I met deaf people for the first time and learned sign language. I also learned that they went to schools that were for deaf people only. None of my deaf friends could write straight sentences in Hindi. Even the brightest ones wrote with a lot of errors. I did not think much of schools for the deaf after talking to my new friends. They did not have mainstream programmes at that time, but some deaf people who could hear a little or were good lip readers, were able to go through schools. No support such as interpreters or note-takers was provided.

My recent visits to various schools for the deaf showed that only oral schools with parental involvement are doing a good job of educating the students. Some private schools that claim to be oral, but use ISL all the time, are also doing a very good job. However, they still claim to be oral. The government schools are a farce; nothing more. Two schools that openly claim to be bilingual—Indore School and Bajaj Institute for Learning in Dehradun—are doing a great job. I can say that deaf education has a long way to go in India. For this we need support from the government and NGOs.

AM: You mentioned that some deaf schools which use ISL still claim to be oral. Why do you think this is?

MV: It is the prestige of being oral and also to keep parents happy. Parents demand that their child be taught orally. The school administrators either do not know benefits of using signs for

teaching deaf children, or do not want to be blamed for not teaching speech.

AM: Considering your experience as a teacher and administrator in deaf schools, what do you think are the key issues in special education? And with the shift towards inclusive education, what could be the potential issues there?

MV: Special education is disfranchised. A school for the deaf in one state does not know what is happening in other states. Even schools in the same city do not have a formal mechanism to exchange ideas. The National Convention of Educators of Deaf should establish a group for principals of schools for the deaf. These groups could discuss common problems and develop solutions. Learning from each other can be very beneficial and cost-effective.

The sad part is the so-called “inclusion.” Inclusion can be great if teachers are trained in various disability areas and all the necessary resources that deaf children need are in place. Placing a deaf child with hearing children where teachers have no background in deafness and have no resources is pure dumping. However, we are not sure which is worse, the government-run special schools that neglect the students or the so-called inclusion.

We need to regulate special schools where teachers are trained. All teachers should be fluent signers, regardless of whether they teach in an oral school or a manual one. There are always some deaf children who need signs and teachers should be trained to work with them.

AM: You talked about “what the child needs” and “how the child can learn better”. Apart from the issue of the communication medium, could you suggest some guidelines regarding teaching methods that teachers of deaf children need to keep in mind?

MV: All children, whether oral or manual, need sign language for social interaction and developing skills in the socio-emotional domain. Children can be taught orally in some classes and using sign language in other classes. The important aspect here is that signs and speech must be kept separate, as a spoken language and ISL are two separate languages. Research in the United States has shown that oral students benefit greatly when the sign component is added. Currently, students with cochlear implants are being taught using signs half the time and orally the other half of the time. These students show greater progress than those taught orally alone.

AM: Could you give us some guidelines regarding curriculum, teaching methods and other basic issues that teachers, administrators as well as school boards need to keep in mind?

MV: The most important factor is focusing on the child and his/her needs in social, emotional, and cognitive areas. We tend to force our beliefs on children. Instead, we need to learn about each child using the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that is used in the United States and other countries. All professionals—teachers, audiologists, speech therapists, counsellors, parents, and administrators—should sit down together and decide the placement and educational plan of a child. This should be reviewed each year. Thus, the child will receive an education specially designed for him/her.

The philosophy should not be oral or manual—it should be “what the child needs” and “how the child can learn better.”

AM: How do you see the role of parents in the education of deaf children? How do you see the role of parents when disability intersects gender?

MV: Parents are the first teachers of a child. They should be involved from the very beginning. Research shows that parental involvement positively correlates with academic achievement. Parents should be a part of the IEP development and a part of the decision for placement.

I am always surprised at the disparity between male and female students in schools for the deaf. Kerala is the only state where a higher percentage of female students attend school, but it is still way lower than the male student population. Parents’ fear of sending a deaf female child to a strange place (school) forces them to keep the child at home. Their fear leads to higher illiteracy among deaf females. Deaf population is superimposed on the hearing population. Until recently, education of hearing females was not common and this is reflected in the schools for the deaf also.

AM: How do you see the nature and scope of disability and deaf studies in India?

MV: This is a new phenomenon in India. We need to have more and more research in various disability areas to enable us to improve the education and rehabilitation of disabled persons. We can learn a lot from Western nations and do not have to reinvent the wheel. However, we also must keep in mind the social, cultural and economic factors when studying various disabilities. Results from research done in various disability studies programmes will help us use new and sound methodologies in teaching.

Andesha Mangla is doing her PhD on “The Role of Sign Language in Deaf Education” from the Department of Linguistics, University of Delhi. She has previously taught deaf students in the B.A. in Applied Sign Language Studies programme at IGNOU.

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