

Interview

**Praveen Singh (PS) talks to
Professor Karuvannur Puthanveetil Mohanan (KPM)**

Prof. K P Mohanan did his Ph. D in Linguistics from MIT in 1982. He has taught at various Universities including University of Texas at Austin, Stanford University and National University of Singapore. Currently he is the Visiting Faculty at IISER, Pune. His interests lie in Theoretical linguistics, Epistemology of academic inquiries, Critical thinking and inquiry in education, Integrative education and research. He has made significant contributions in the field of Phonology, Morphology and Syntax and has several research papers and books to his credit. He is best known for his book *The Theory of Lexical Phonology*.
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PS: Could you, very briefly, tell us about yourself, your entry into the world of language and Linguistics, how it came to be a part of you?

KPM: Well, my undergraduate degree was in Physics. And I hated Physics. So, when I was supposed to be studying Physics, I would read a lot of English literature. I barely scraped through my undergrad degree. Then my father thought that I should do a degree in English literature. I thought that was good, but when I joined the Masters program in English literature, I discovered that I hated that. At that time I started studying philosophy and psychology. And after my Masters in English literature I bumped into Linguistics accidentally. And one of the inspirations was N. S. Prabhu. I discovered that this is a very exciting subject. And I started studying it on my own. I went to EFLU (which was earlier called CIEFL) and started pursuing Linguistics, ended up at MIT. At MIT nobody tried to teach me linguistics. I did linguistics the way students in a pottery workshop work as apprentices to experienced potters, and learnt how to do linguistics. Since nobody

taught me Linguistics the traditional way, I came to develop an interest in Linguistics.

PS: You said nobody was there to teach you Linguistics. You learnt it like an apprentice at a potter's.

KPM: Yeah, that is the way MIT works. We started doing research in the very first year with experienced researchers and if at all there was any classroom activity, it was like a debate between the teacher and the student. MIT expects students to show that the teachers are wrong. I am talking about the MIT many years ago, in the late 70s.

PS: How did you find the education system in US different from the education system in India?

KPM: The education system that was practised in India during those days expected a good student to read a lot and repeat whatever the authorities had said. This is what I used to do before I went to MIT. When I went to MIT I found that everything I 'knew' about Linguistics was

no longer important, and I discovered it was extremely hard for me to keep pace with even what was happening in the classroom. Once I had a problem in phonology, and I went to Morris Halle to consult him. He listened to the problem and said it was a good problem, and asked me what the solution was. I said that I didn't know the solution. He said he didn't have solutions to all the problems of the world. He told me, "Go and find a solution, and we will have an intelligent discussion." I was first shocked when he told me that he didn't know the solution to the problem. I wondered, how could the foremost phonologist say that he didn't know something. How can a god say he is ignorant. That was a shock. And then this god said that what he couldn't solve, he wanted a first year graduate student to solve. You know, I had gone to MIT to sit at the feet of great masters and learn from them. I was shocked to hear the master saying, "Go away and figure it out on your own". Since he ordered me to find a solution, I had to obey. I found a solution, and then we developed it into a paper. That was a cultural shock. I discovered that graduate students' job was to think independently, and this is important because Morris specifically told me that my job as a student was to demonstrate that he was wrong, Chomsky was wrong, etc., to develop Linguistics further. That looked difficult to accept at first.

PS: You said you were already teaching even before going to MIT. Did you change your teaching style after having received these cultural shocks?

KPM: Absolutely. Before I went to MIT, as I said earlier, I went to CIEFL and did my diploma in English language teaching. I wrote a series of correspondence course lessons for CIEFL: Twenty lessons in Linguistics, and twenty lessons in Grammar. I wrote the ultimate truth. Do you know how I discovered the ultimate truth? From books! And my job as a teacher was to simplify things, make them more interesting and teach the ultimate truths to the student. I was, in a sense, indoctrinating my students. I was very popular because I was good at exposition, simple explanations and all that stuff. The lessons that I had written were extremely popular and continued to be used long after I had left CIEFL. I look back with horror at what I did to my students. I didn't know anything better so that's what I did. At MIT in my first year, I took a course that Ken Hale and Wayne O' Neil taught on Linguistics education. And the basic idea that Ken Hale and Wayne O' Neil suggested was that, instead of handing down readymade knowledge of Linguistics to students, you can design the course in such a way that they construct Linguistics.

The idea was that, it is not the content knowledge of Linguistics that is important but the ways of thinking that are characteristic of Linguistics as a science. So what students learn would be the methods of scientific inquiry. They said this could also be done in high school. And my response, I must confess, was, "This is completely insane..." I thought that was impossible. Ken didn't push it. He simply said, "Why don't you try it out and find out?" And even though I thought this was

just insane, I decided to try it out because Ken was saying it and I had trust in Ken. Tara and I taught a one week course in phonetics, following Ken's ideas. The course was meant for language teachers in Boston. And, to our pleasant surprise, it was almost like a shock. We discovered that students learnt Phonetics that could not have been learnt in a regular traditional course over a year. It was extraordinarily successful. Besides learning the content, the students learnt it with considerable understanding.

PS: From your experience as a teacher and later your experience at MIT, were there any insights that you found really crucial, which changed the way you looked at children or adults learning their first language and later, the second language?

KPM: The only change that I can remember is the change from total passive acceptance of indoctrination by authorities which was the state before I went to MIT, to thinking about these issues on my own without respect for authorities. And my primary interest during those days was Theoretical Linguistics and not language teaching per se. But, of course, you can't help glancing sideways at language teaching occasionally. I am not going to defend these views but since you asked me this, I will give you my personal subjective opinions. I am not talking as a researcher, because I haven't done any research in second language learning and so on. I find that within the Chomskian view of language learning, where children simply

experience language around them, you don't teach children a language. In the way, for example, you put a seed in the ground and water it and the seed develops into a tree.

The same way, the grammar grows in the mind of the child. And for children, you don't have to teach them, they pick it up on their own. This also applies to writing actually. So, our daughter learnt how to read when she was about three years old. We didn't teach her the letters of the alphabet, and we did not teach her any spelling either. We read to her and she was simply looking at the book, and she associated it with the stuff she heard. By the time she was three, she was a reasonably good reader. She read stories and she learnt spelling. She learnt letters like *a, b, c* and *d* long after she became a fluent reader. She *discovered* that letters existed. I still remember, we were standing in front of the Botanical Gardens in Singapore, waiting for a cab and she looked at the sign board and she suddenly discovered, she went to it and she pointed out the letter A. And then another letter, then another letter A, that's when she discovered these recurrent things with writing. And she learnt alphabet at that point. The same thing would apply to second language learning in schools as well. Teaching concepts like nouns and verbs and adjectives and so on is largely a waste of time. If we expose children to the use of language, that's all there is.

This is exactly what Chomsky would also say. There is a famous article 'Listener article' that Chomsky wrote in 1968 or so, when people asked him for advice on language teaching, he said, "If you are a

language teacher, don't come to me.” Modern Linguistics is kind of useless (for language teaching). This is like saying, you don't ask a relativity theorist or a quantum mechanics person, how to play basketball. That's a different game. Not even Newtonian mechanics. The interests are completely different. The kinds of things that theoretical linguists are interested in are of no use to the language teacher because they cannot be taught. And the kinds of things that the language teacher is interested in, for example, what is the past tense of [go], the linguist has no interest in that. Why should anybody bother about that stuff? The irregular things are what the language teacher is interested in. The universals are what the linguist is interested in. They have completely different interests.

PS: OK, but do you think that there is some understanding of Linguistics that might be of help to the language teacher?

KPM: Not the Linguistics of the kind that theoretical linguists are pursuing. The kind of stuff that the undergrad students of Linguistics get in their first semester of Linguistics is enough. It's not heavy structure, theory or anything like that. Just common sense stuff. That would be useful. But there is nothing beyond that.

PS: Do you think that language can be used to develop the capacity for scientific inquiry?

KPM: When you say language teacher, are you talking about an English language

teacher teaching English to kids who do not have English, or are you talking about the Hindi language teacher teaching kids who already speak Hindi fairly fluently? These are two different things.

PS: Would you take different positions on the two?

KPM: Yeah, because the teacher of Hindi, who is teaching Hindi to fluent speakers of Hindi can use Hindi as a terrain to build a capacity for scientific theory construction or scientific inquiry, in general. But, if the same teacher goes to Kerala, where there are many villages where they have no Hindi at all and the teacher's goal is to teach some Hindi. For that purpose, Linguistics is useless. For the first purpose, Linguistics is eminently suitable. It's fantastic stuff because theory construction in Linguistics is possible in a classroom. Theory construction in Physics is extremely difficult because you can't collect the data for Physics in the classroom. In Linguistics, you can get the data from the students. Not only that, but also variable data. So lab experiments and theory construction, all of that can be done in the same space. And I think that way, Linguistics is unique. So, I would say, it is probably the best terrain for learning how to construct scientific theories... Next to that, I would say, Biology is good.

PS: Now, getting back to the case where you have a Hindi language teacher trying to teach Hindi to a class that does not know Hindi. Do you think that there also knowledge of linguistics can be helpful?

KPM: No. There, linguistics is going to be a hindrance. Instead, all that you need to do is give the kind of experience that children/first language speakers of English/Hindi, or any other language for that matter, have. Nobody should *teach* them Hindi. Children absorb it from the environment through meaningful language use. So, what the Hindi teacher has to do is to provide environment in which children have to use the language meaningfully. And, they pick it up.

PS: How do you see a language teacher tackling situations where you may have 25-30 or sometimes even 40-50 kids speaking anywhere between 5 to 15 languages in classrooms and English is a foreign language for all those children. So, what can a language teacher do in such cases?

KPM: Let me tell you how I picked up English. I didn't pick up any English from school or college. I went to a Malayalam medium school. I couldn't speak a word of English. I couldn't read English. I couldn't write English. And after I finished my high school, my father gave me *Glimpses of World History* and asked me to read it. I struggled with it. I had to look up all the words. In one page I had at least twenty words that I didn't know. I consulted the dictionary and learnt the stuff. I learnt to speak English in my second year of the Bachelor's degree. I couldn't speak English till then. I learnt English through English movies. I can't recall anything that I learnt about English — whether it is English reading or writing, or accent — from any teacher or from any textbook.

I have also seen kids, for example kids in Hyderabad in CIEFL, who spoke about six languages by the time they were about three. Nobody taught them. They picked up languages from their surroundings. So, the question really is — can we give (to children) that kind of an environment, not in a city like Hyderabad where it is easy but in a rural setting, let's say a village in Kerala where you find a monolingual community? What can the teacher do? Yes. The teacher can expose the kids to, for example, English videos, and if they just watch the videos where the story is interesting, kids will pick up English. And then, the teacher reads out the stories to the kids. But there should not simply be the audio but also the text that they can see. Assume, for example, there is text coming up on the TV screen, and the teacher is reading it out, or may be the person who is creating the video is also reading it out. So kids hear the words, sentences, also see the written text. And kids will learn to read before they learn the alphabet. Kids are interested in stories. That's how our daughter learnt to read, because we would read the story half way through, and then stop and leave the book there, and then say we don't want to read it now, we'll read it tomorrow. She wanted to get the story. And, when we went away, she started reading it because she wanted to. It was meaningful for her. But if you teach kids letters a, b, c and standing lines and sloping lines, or if you teach some phonics, it is completely meaningless for them. They are not going to learn.

PS: What you are saying is that there is no need to teach a language. Language will happen automatically.

KPM: Most importantly, you have to engage in activities which are of interest to kids. But it is different when you are twenty years old and you want to go to Germany or to some other place. Tara learnt Spanish that way. We had to go to Argentina where they speak only Spanish. So, when you are thirty or forty or fifty [years old], those things don't happen. You know that you want to learn Spanish because you want to go to Argentina. So, she learnt Spanish by going to Duolingo which is like a combination of English and Spanish. Again, they were using the same principles. They use, for example, translation for that matter. So, Grammar Translation Method is pretty good.

PS: After the 1980s people have mostly looked down upon the Grammar Translation Method or any such attempt on the part of the teacher in classrooms and here you are saying that it is good. This is a new take on GT method.

KPM: I am not recommending Grammar Translation Method where Grammar is taught for its own sake, instead only for occasional tips here and there. Oh, okay! That's very different. Only when an adult needs it and also a self-conscious learner who is learning the grammar and has the question: Hey! Why does this language have strange things that my mother tongue doesn't have?

PS: Are there ways in which the language teacher, whether she is teaching small kids or adults, can somehow make the classes

more interesting for both the sets of learners in separate classes?

KPM: For the younger kids who are not interested in learning a language but they are interested in doing various things, playing games and so on. They might be interested, for example in singing songs, they might be interested in play acting in their mother tongue or in English. They would love to do that. They would like to hear stories. This is what the group called 'Karadi tales' used to do. They would sing songs and tell stories. [For example,] Usha Uthup comes and sings English songs, and kids learn to sing in English and they get the pronunciation; they get the words. But they think they are learning how to sing. I can sing Hindi songs and I don't know the meaning of any of them. The sounds just come to me. Of course, if I am also using [speaking?] Hindi, those words would come to me. It will assist me later. The same way kids will learn to sing. They would learn to start acting in plays and then you ask them to write the plays or modify the plays.

Let's say for example, there is a short play of two pages. Kids memorize the lines and then you tell them, what if you want to change the story? You write the play or modify it. They wouldn't even realize they are learning English. They would think they are writing plays. But they would be learning how to write. The same is true with stories. They want to know the stories and we ask them to write stories. But it has to be things that they want to do and they find meaningful. Very little in language textbooks that we use today are of any

interest to children. It is not something that they want to read but something that the teacher wants to do. So, the teacher has to shift, saying, what is it that children would like to do independently of language where I can keep language in the background. They wouldn't even know they are learning a language, and make them learn that. Language comes in sideways; language is not the object.

PS: What could a language teacher do where there is no chalk and no board?

KPM: Story-telling, singing, play-acting, all these are still possible.

PS: Can you suggest things that should be made an essential part of the teacher-training programmes that are carried out in this country?

KPM: Abolish all teacher-training programmes, that's the very first step because I have not seen a single teacher-training programme that is relevant to teachers. Let me explain why this is so. In the current system of education, let me stick to school education, class I to class X. Someone in the board, some CBSE or some state board decides what the syllabus is, they prescribe the textbooks, they decide everything including final examination and then the rest of the decisions are made by the principal of the school, not by the teachers. The teachers have no choice in any of these texts. What is the teacher's job? To use the textbooks to do something in the classroom. The syllabus is decided, the

textbook is decided, final examinations are decided, even the kinds of questions that the teachers have to ask will be decided by the principal. If you have to keep the job, you have to obey these masters. Then there are the parents who will say, "Have you prepared our children for the exams?" If you don't do that, your job is threatened. So, the teacher is simply a robot with very little choice. So, teacher-training programmes, instead of empowering teachers how *not* to do their jobs like robots, teach some irrelevant stuff like psychology of learning, Piaget's theory and behaviourist theory and constructivism and so on, a whole bunch of stuff that is completely irrelevant to the teacher's job. Waste of time.

If you want to change the quality of education, it is not just the teacher, the victim, the robot that you need to change. You need to first train the board members. Ideally you should change them, and give training courses to education ministers.

But I assume that education ministers are not 'educatable' nor will they be interested so leave that out. The next level would be the people who are, you know, in MHRD, other officials, and so on. They too will not come to any training programme, so forget that. Then there are the board members. So provide training programmes for NCERT folks and CBSE folks and State Board folks and so on. But we face the same problem. They too won't come. Okay so give up on all that stuff. Then there is the school management and the school administration. Not many school managements and school administrations will be willing to come to these programmes. But some rare cases might. Find them.

PS: So what do you think is wrong with our real classroom practices, the teacher-training practices and the administrative guidelines?

KPM: You see, teacher training is a professional programme. Any professional programme has to be based on some expectation, realistic expectation of the future function of the person you are training. That means you have to ask yourself: what is it that the teacher has to do in the school? Teachers cannot create materials. They cannot design their own assessment. Most of these things are done by somebody else. The primary preoccupation for the teacher is covering the portion. The teachers that I have interacted with say, we can't deal with any of this fancy stuff. We have to cover the portion. Okay, given that scenario, what can a teacher do? If the teacher doesn't cover the portion she loses her job. So, where should education reform begin? Not with the teacher, not with the student, these are both victims. Students have no choice. Teachers have no choice. Who are the people who have the power to change the system? Those people are not going to change it. That's why I said the mid-level: the school administration and the school management. They have some options, though not a great deal. Because even they have to go by what the board says in the final examination. If they don't help the kids do well in the final examination, there won't be students. And many schools have to make sure that kids do well in IIT-JEE. Both of these are detrimental to students' growth. The necessary evil. So, let me ask, "Does any teacher-training

programme teach teachers how to coach effectively and efficiently?" Coaching, what the coaching factories do, every teacher is required to do that. Do any of the teacher-training programmes do that? Not that I know of, because they think it is beneath their dignity to do it. Practical reality is that this is part of the teacher's function. In fact, in many schools that's the only function, nothing else. So, skip all the psychology of learning and constructivism and all that, it's totally irrelevant stuff.

Take for example, NCF 2005. They have a huge bunch of words about constructivism. I was in NCERT as an external member for some time and I asked many of them what constructivism meant. Nobody had a clue. It's just a word. The question that I asked was this – Imagine a classroom which is constructivist but they don't subscribe to other things such as experiential learning, interactive learning, activity based learning, task based learning, project based learning, problem based learning, inquiry based learning, peer learning, and so on. One teacher subscribes to everything but not constructivism, and another teacher subscribes to constructivism but not the other things. Is there a difference between the two teachers? Nobody has an answer. They don't know what the word means. They just use those words. Show me any person who wrote the constructivism stuff in the NCF 2005 who really understands what the word implies, except for about, I would say, 3 or 4 people and I have specific people in mind. I have read some of their work. The rest of the people have no clue. I have also asked, "Can you distinguish between a constructivist textbook and a

non-constructivist textbook? Can you distinguish between”, this is more important, “a constructivist examination question and a non-constructivist examination question?” The students learn what is needed for the examination, right?

If they cannot design constructivist examination questions, none of this has any use. It's simply rhetorical buzzword. Now, it is possible to define constructivism in a certain way such that you design constructivist examination questions such that constructivism spreads to schools. You don't need to do anything, all that you have to do is to design constructivist examination questions. Teachers will be constructivist automatically, because parents will force them, school principals will force them. You don't need training, they will learn or they will come and beg you to teach them how to do that stuff. All that you need to do is to change the examination. But who in our country is going to do that?

PS: There is a popular view that English connects people in different parts of this country. How do you think this view should be reflected in the pedagogy? Is that even needed?

KPM: If you ask the question why we need English in India, the main answer is we need English as a window to knowledge. If I want to learn mathematics or understand quantum mechanics I have to read English. So minimally English allows us to access knowledge that is constructed in the world. Some knowledge is also constructed in French or German and so on but

internationally English is the most dominant language. So monolingual speakers of English can manage but monolingual speakers of even French and German will find it hard because they may have to go to English-speaking countries. It just happens that economically the most dominant language is English. It may happen in 20 years or 30 years that Chinese is the language, that language in the sense that it [China] becomes the richest country and where knowledge is constructed in which case all of us would have to learn Chinese. This is simply socio-economic. So the reason for learning English is simply socio-economic-cum-academic and that's how we have to teach English — as a way of accessing knowledge.

PS: Thank you, sir. It was great talking to you.

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