
INTERVIEW

In Conversation with Udaya Narayana Singh

Suranjana Barua (SB)

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SB: Thank you for speaking to LLT. As you know, this is a Special Issue on *The Language(s) of Education in India*. Please tell us which languages you grew up with, languages of your education, and the languages which you may have learnt on your own free will? How did these languages influence the person you are today?

UNS: I grew up listening to a lullaby sung by my mother, whose origin was as complicated as mine. She had a good voice and sang Bangla songs of yesteryears with the same ease as Hindi Bhajans. Her family hailed from the Kishoregunj region under the Mymensingh district in Bangladesh. However, her father being in the Military accounts, was transferred to all sorts of places. So, she grew up in Mumbai, Patna, Agra, Meerut, and Chandigarh until she came to Kolkata to do a Master's degree. She spoke in the Dacca-Mymensingh variety of Bangla with her brothers and sisters. However, she joined a Master's programme in Hindi language and literature at the University of Calcutta around India's independence. As luck would have it, she met with a bright but rustic boy with excellent command over Urdu and Hindi in class, whose mother tongue was Maithili. She learned later that his undergraduate

subject was Sanskrit. They fell in love, got married soon after the Master's, and got teaching jobs in colleges. Before marriage, he had made a condition that she would have to speak to him in Maithili.

Nevertheless, for someone with Bangla and Hindi and exposure to the entire Hindi-speaking belt, she had no difficulty picking up her husband's language. He, too, had to learn the spoken Bangla to be able to survive in the seat of Bangla intelligentsia in the College Street campus of the University of Calcutta among such luminaries as Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta, Pramatha Nath Bishi, Narayan Ganguli as her senior colleagues with Suniti Kumar Chatterji and Sukumar Sen being his teachers. Soon after, my mother joined Professor Sukumar Sen as a doctoral candidate to work on Maithili folklore.

With this background, I arrived, initially picking up and speaking Bangla from my mother and her sister who lived with us, and perhaps also from the neighbourhood. I am told I was very particular about which Bangla songs must be sung before I sleep. My parents spoke to each other in Maithili. But they both spoke to me in Bangla. My brother and sister also used Bangla as a conversational language in general. However, we all spoke to our grandparents or relatives from Mithila who came to stay with us for different segments in Maithili.

Meanwhile, my parents used to be away from home for the whole day, teaching and offering tuition in Hindi, so I was left mostly with my grandmother (and my father's sister), who spoke only in Maithili. However, she could read and write perfectly in Bangla, mostly reading Kashiram Das and Krittivasa Ojha's epics. However, my grandfather knew only Maithili and Hindi.

Our house was also a space where the well-known Hindi and Maithili authors would come and stay or spend time, many staying for days or weeks, and I was exposed to this multilingual tradition thanks to the poet-authors like Nagarjun, Rajkamal Choudhury, Subhadra Jha or Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, and others. To top it all, my father continued his learning of Perso-Arabic culture and language, thanks to his friends like Prof. Ata Qarim Burke and Maulavi Saheb, from whom he would first learn Persian and then Arabic. He formally learned Pali too from the revered Professors Anukul Chandra Bandyopadhyay and Sukumar Sengupta. He finally acquired additional Master's degrees in Pali and Persian. There was, thus, a tradition of language learning at home.

Exposure to multiple languages and cultural traditions was a great boon in my case. Every year, I would also travel to different parts of Mithila and Bihar, with direct exposure to varieties of Maithili as spoken in Saharsa, Purnia, Bhagalpur and other places. However, the early Maithili poetry reading I was exposed to was mainly in the Darbhanga-Madhubani variety. We had a printing press at home that used to publish Nepali and Bhojpuri stuff, which attracted me to these as well. The authors and proofreaders would come and spend time with the composers who were my best companions in my childhood den around the College Street area (known for housing the largest number of publishers).

My multilingual upbringing and my love and respect for different languages shaped me as a pluri-cultural person, so much so that I would not feel out of place in Punjabi, Gujarati, Telugu, Urdu (Dakkhini) and Kannada environments in later life.

SB: You describe yourself as a ‘grassroot bilingual’. Which language(s) are you ‘most comfortable’ in while speaking and writing? If so, why?

UNS: I guess my answer to the earlier question has covered this aspect partly. However, what it did not say was about the exciting family experiment conducted by my parents. My sister was sent to a Hindi medium school, and she eventually came up in life studying Hindi in Kolkata, Benares, Sagar and Ujjain. She later taught Hindi language and literature, although she was a prolific author-translator in both Hindi and Maithili. My younger brother was sent to a highly respectable English medium School in Kolkata, and his knowledge of Maithili and Hindi was limited to oral competence but he contributed significantly to the Maithili film and television industry and to publishing a major literary magazine even though he was not exposed to Maithili literature. As for me, I was sent to three purely Bangla medium schools—first in Barahnagar (where I was in a hostel while studying in standards IV and V), and then in South Kolkata, and finally at the Hare School on College Street—the oldest school in the country. The school and environmental exposure (including my poet-friends writing in Bangla) drew me towards my mother’s tongue. But my frequent visits to Mithila, my father driving us through rural regions there, my thorough exposure to Maithili books in my grandfather’s library in our village home, and my early exposure to the Maithili stage as a young actor dragged me towards my father’s tongue.

That explains my claim of being a 'grassroot bilingual.' The second part of your question is difficult to answer. Whatever answer I might give may be politically misunderstood by my two different sets of followers in the Maithili and Bangla literary areas. Initially, I published (in Maithili) only under a pen name, 'Nachiketa', who would never be seen on the stage. Most people did not know for a long time that Udaya Narayana and Nachiketa are the same person. When the identity was revealed after two poetry anthologies came out in 1966 and 1971, the Maithili world thought I was a poor poet-author needing my father's help to be presentable. When my writings contradicted my father's philosophy, belief system and style, they were adequately answered. By then I began writing plays and acting on the Maithili stage. As for the Bangla world, the English spelling of my last name created confusion about my identity. In Bangla, my printed identity was 'Singha' or Simha. Most of my Bangla readers and followers are unaware that I also write in Maithili.

Although I have translated a lot from Maithili to Bangla later (about five book-length materials—all published by Sahitya Akademi) and also from Bangla to Maithili, I have a lot of hesitation and feeling of insecurity in translating my own writing between these languages. I have translated my Maithili poems into English for Katha Poets Café. In giving talks, I am comfortable in using Bangla, Maithili and English—all. I have also been made to speak in Hindi, and the listeners say that the expression was lucid. My interlocutors in cities in Pakistan commented that I spoke Urdu very well. But the contents, themes, and lines of poems come to me like lightning in one of the two languages, which decides what would be written in which language. When and why this happens, I do not know. So what I write in one language is very different stylistically and thematically compared to the other.

SB: You are a very prolific writer in multiple languages. You are also a very renowned poet and translator. As a major poet, playwright, essayist and editor, you engage in Maithili, Bangla, English and Hindi. How would you describe your relations with these languages of your writing? Did formal education influence the choice of your expression in any particular domain?

UNS: Once again, a part of my answer to the third question lies in my earlier response. I had no formal exposure to Hindi, not even in my school

curriculum. Similarly, I did not learn Maithili formally. English was only a subject and a matter of educated choice for me until I completed under graduation in Sanskrit College, where we were also taught some bit of Pali, Old Persian and Sanskrit. The teaching of Linguistics in Sanskrit College happened only in Bangla. English education was actually introduced at the Master's level at the University of Delhi. That is about the formal exposure to these languages.

Needless to say, English literature, especially poetry and theatre, attracted me very much. My mother would regularly take me to watch theatre shows and films in all three languages: Bangla, Hindi and English. I became very fond of Sanskrit plays by Prof. Rama Chowdhury and her students too. Therefore, my initial writings were in both Bangla and Maithili. Translating English, Sanskrit, and Hindi into Bangla and Maithili was a passion. As a voracious reader, I had finished reading through Bankim, Sarat Chandra and Tagore in the Ramakrishna Mission Library in Golpark, where I was also learning French. A year earlier, I had my first exposure to French at the Alliance Française du Calcutta. The exposure to French as a library language stood me good in my undergraduate days at Sanskrit College, where many textbooks in Linguistics were in French, with no English versions being available.

There is another language I learned formally, i.e. Sanskrit. Here, I was a student of the traditional 'Tola' or Chatuspathi system, and I had my teacher coming from Nabadweep (Nadia) who saw me through the Adya and Madhya diploma examinations of Bangiya Sanskrit Parshad. I also learned 'Supadma Vyakarana' from Pundit Mahananda Thakur of the Tola in Sanskrit College. That facilitated my courses on Panini and Indian Grammatical Tradition at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the USA, where George Cardona was my teacher. But formal education in all these languages only helped me read books in those languages. The vocal parts in me derived purely from my experiences. Bangla speaking and recitations came naturally. I had the good fortune of befriending many major Bangla poets and authors right from my early days, and their diction and speech left a significant mark. Moreover, I had numerous instances of my fellow actors in Maithili Rangamancha speaking and enacting in several languages. All the women actors were fond of me as a child artist, and they all (Beena Das, Beena Sen or Chandrakala) spoke Maithili on stage but other languages as their mother tongue.

SB: You have contributed immensely to Maithili Literature. How important is literature in standardising a language, more so if it does not otherwise have an official status?

UNS: For all of us who chose to make a literary career in Maithili, rather than getting drawn towards writing and publishing in Hindi where there was money, name and fame, it was a conscious decision to contribute to making the language more functional in different contexts. The language was not yet included in the 8th Schedule, for which the movement was on, but it had received the recognition as a literary language because of inclusion of Maithili in the *Sahitya Akademi* thanks to the decision of the then President, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, who saw the richness of the literary expression in a major exhibition at Prayag, organised by Prof. Jayakant Mishra of Allahabad University. Of course, I had a large number of fellow writers, both seniors and contemporaries who wrote in both Maithili and Hindi, but the effect of getting so many bright writers interested in contributing to Maithili, and thanks to getting great editors such as Sudhanshu Shekhar Chowdhury and also Hansraj (of '*Mithila Mihir*' fame from the Indian Nation Press, Patna) or Prabodh Narayan Singh (of '*Mithila Darshan*' fame, publishing from Kolkata), and Krishnakant Mishra (editing '*Vaidehi*'), Keertinarayan Mishra (of '*Aakhar*'), Kedar Kanan (of '*Bharati Mandan*' fame), Gajendra Thakur (of the rich e-zine and archive in Delhi – *eVaidehi*) or even critic-editors like Prof. Deo Shankar Naveen of JNU, Gaurinath (of '*Antika*'), Sukant Som (working on the editorial board of a daily newspaper in Bihar), Ramlochan Thakur (of '*Agnipatra*') or Taranand Viyogi and Arunabh Saurabh as well as arrival of several serious scholar-authors trained abroad in the '50s to '70s (such as Dr Subhadra Jha and Ramawtar Yadav and Yogendra Yadav), all contributed to spelling standardisation to stylistic decisions. Towards that end, the contributions of poet-lexicographer Pt. Govind Jha (still lives at 101) and the late critic-editor Mohan Bhardwaj are undeniable. Just as theatre people made significant contribution to promoting the spoken standard based around Madhubani-Darbhanga region or the parallel standard of Purnia-Saharsa, the creative writers of the likes of Mayanand Mishra and Arsi Prasad Singh (well-known in both Hindi and Maithili), Somdev (originally a bilingual Bhojpur-Maithili), Jeevkant, Prabhas Kumar Chowdhury, Ramanand Renu, Harekrishna Jha, Vibhuti Anand and others added to the emergence of the modern literary standard. Add to that, the famous radio-TV personalities with

golden voice and diction: Gangesh Gunjan from Delhi (formerly from the AIR), Pramod Kumar Jha from Ranchi (of Doordarshan), 'Batak Bhai' from Patna. There were also three very prolific senior writers who made a very significant contribution to language and literary standardisation: Professors Surandra Jha 'Suman' (also a major translator), Chandranath Mishra 'Amar', and Ramdeo Jha.

If Maithili has achieved political status as well as literary standard, it was due to the contribution of these literary personalities and many more. My long stint as the Chief Editor of the highest sold and most complete literary magazine, *Mithila Darshan* during the last two decades must have had its effect, just as the works of Babu Saheb Chowdhury of '*Maithili Darshan*' and other editors such as Ramanand Jha 'Raman,' Vinit Utpal and Ashish Anchinhar.

SB: The National Education Policy envisages mother tongue to be the medium of instruction 'until at least Grade V, but preferably till Grade VIII and beyond'. We have 22 Regional Languages but thousands of other languages are spoken as mother tongue! In a deeply multilingual and heterogenous country like India, is it really feasible for each person to be educated in her mother tongue?

UNS: What was said in the NEP, 2020, was a repeat of what UNESCO had been preaching since 1953. There have been many international documents and educational and psycholinguistic experiments that justified this approach. They all praise the 'Multilingual Policy' being followed in many nation-states. I recall Nancy Hornberger's (2002) comment: "The one language—one nation ideology of language policy and national identity is no longer the only available one worldwide (if it ever was)." However, at the same time, managing a multilingual space is hugely expensive and messy. For example, what a government could do by working on graded teaching materials in one language would now have to be done for so many languages. Thus, getting researchers to work on gradation or material developers sensitive to the lexis, sentential patterns, rhyming structure and imageries associated with particular cultures related to these languages would not be easy. Therefore, the sheer economics of management of a policy as prescribed by the NEP 2020 would be a difficult challenge, especially in a country like India. I would suggest a layered approach using a 'Staircase Strategy': Lower you are at the bottom of the pyramid, have ground-level teaching materials in

as many mother-tongues as possible—mapping onto the local language with greater functionality. As one climbs up, the local to the regional (or standard) language mapping would be ideal. As one moves further, exposure to the national level languages (and parallel teaching) could be considered. For example, teaching English could wait until the child had sufficient fluency in the mother tongue, local language(s), and regional language with some exposure to recitations, singing, enacting and viewing performances in Hindi. The strategy will require a severe research and material production regime beyond NCERT. Many players are working on the ground level in India, and it would require a thought leader to take this task in a mission mode with their help.

India is an argumentative culture. We are still debating the pros and cons of media of education and how many languages our children should be exposed to. But the time has come to cross that stage and think about a Decade of Rebuilding.

SB: What will be your recommendations for medium of instruction at different levels of education? Can we switch to the 8th Schedule languages for higher education? Also, how can we have a linguistically inclusive classroom and gain from the established correlation between multilingualism and cognitive growth?

UNS: For all practical purposes, many of our college-level institutions located in remote corners have already started 'teaching' in these scheduled languages. Our textbooks come in English (and perhaps some in Hindi or Tamil, too), but that does not stop our teachers from explaining and teaching bilingually in the classrooms—with terminologies retained in English. Where we need to concentrate is to first recognise this 'bilinguality' in educational institutions and come up with a large number of knowledge texts in the major languages. To start with, one could select those 8th Schedule languages with a significant outreach. For the newly recognised languages of the 8th Schedule, I have already discussed the model of 'Translativity' in several places. To that extent, the 'National Translation Mission (NTM), that I had set up as a follow-up to National Knowledge Commission recommendations, was meant to generate such knowledge bases on a large scale. That was also a recommendation of the Planning Commission about this national project. Unfortunately, there are (and will always be) several institutions that take pride in claiming that languages other than English have no

entry into their campus. However, this situation will have to change. That would facilitate the blooming of innovators from small towns and rural areas, making it big.

SB: India has an alarming number of endangered languages. Many communities are switching over to more standard varieties of language. In an increasingly digital and globalised world, some languages like English have emerged as the *Lingua Franca* and hence also the language of opportunity. What are your views on this dichotomy between languages of opportunity versus heritage languages that need preservation? Can technology help here too?

UNS: The skills and speech forms that could make anyone achieve the desired goal will always be in demand. Those languages are likely to be lost in the game of survival which have the least functional utility, i.e. are used in very few socio-cultural functions. They are likely to disappear from both our register and also from the societal network. Further, while language activists, conservationists and the government will always be concerned with language loss, ordinary people will shift from a weaker language to the more widely used speech variety. They may eventually shift their linguistic identity as well. One could take the easy recourse and describe English, French, or Spanish as Killer languages, but one cannot deny that these languages help reach many more places and achieve more tasks and utilities. Therefore, at times, generations of migrants and new settlers undergo language shifts. A mere propagation in favor of utility or supremacy of the mother tongue will not work unless we can create and sustain a technological platform which allows both the mother tongue and language of power. The platform should also have word look-up help to perform code switches between these two language options. Our endangered languages research has taken us only to a museological view of languages in danger, as if documentation is the only thing we can do in such situations.

SB: Many states of India have Hindi and/ or English as one of their official languages. How does this impact local languages? What could be the possible solutions to reconcile geo-strategically sensitive concerns with linguistic rights of minorities? Would you recommend that we should have a single language as a marker of our national identity?

UNS: Many of us have been arguing for a long time that one language, one culture, one party and one song to sing cannot be the destiny of

a geopolitical entity such as India. It is a country that believes in both *Advaita*—the Supreme—and also in its rival philosophical tradition, including a ground level humanism often followed in our *loka* or folk tradition. Our objects of worship are many, and our models of literary-cultural achievement are plural. Our dresses, designs, motifs, performances, entertainment, and culinary art, all show the plurality. Therefore, imposing one language even at the state level is often difficult as most of our states are multilingual. That was also the reason as to why many states have several associate official languages, along with one major entity. The linguistic human rights for indigenous speech communities in our context would mean granting them the opportunity to express—by way of writing, singing, creating or performing in their own tongues, and be accepted as separate linguistic groups without facing any discrimination by the political and educational administration. The idea would be to add the other tongues that are functional and with wider market reach to their kitty. As of now, the fact that seven or eight states have English as their state official languages has grown out of a political and administrative compulsion. Sometimes, the idea is to oppose the spread of Hindi as an official tool but at other times it is often a compromise because these states may have a large number of speech communities or distinct tribes not ready to accept supremacy of any one of them. Suniti Babu's description of 'Harmony of Contrasts' (rather than 'Unity in Diversity') is perfectly suitable as a description of our situation. We have to learn to accept our plural existence.

Reference

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