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## INTERVIEW

### In Conversation with Shreesh Chaudhary

*Devaki Lakshminarayan*

*Shreesh Chaudhary (SC) is a former Professor of English and Linguistics in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Madras. He obtained his PhD from CIEFL, Hyderabad (now EFL University). His research interests include sociolinguistics, language and education, and phonology of English. Foreigners and Foreign Languages in India: A Sociolinguistic History (2008), published by Foundation Books, is one of his monumental contributions. Apart from teaching and research, he is keenly interested in the well-being and education of children. He has been working quietly with institutions, organisations, and individuals for this cause.*

**Devaki Lakshminarayan (DL):** Thank you for speaking to LLT. 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?

**SC:** All my life I have heard at least four languages, Hindi, Maithili, Sanskrit and English, and I think I have not done too badly in any of them. Hindi remained the medium of instruction for the entire school and most of my college education. I started learning English when I was ten.

I had books in all these languages at home. Reading was my father's favourite pastime. He read all kinds of books in all languages<sup>1</sup>, and had a "big" personal library. By the time I left, I could not only read and understand books in these languages but also wrote in some of them. My English essays were published in the school magazine, *Chandra Rashmi*.

After school, I did English major, and Master's degree. But there were limited occasions to speak in English. However, during my college days,

I was a member of a club in the college, and another in the town, where I got an opportunity to speak in English.

While I was still at the college, I worked as a reporter for *The Times of India* News Service. Some of my reports were published prominently. After my Master's degree, I went to Patna and joined the English desk of the Hindustan Samachar, a Hindi News Agency. Here I heard and learnt standard spoken Hindi. Six months after my Master's result, I joined as a lecturer in English at Ranchi University. Occasionally, I worked in the Ranchi Bureau of *The Indian Nation*, an English daily published from Patna<sup>2</sup>, and occasionally published reviews and essays here.

In 1978, I got a chance to go to the Central Institute of English & Foreign Languages (CIEFL)<sup>3</sup>, Hyderabad, first to do a PG Diploma in the Teaching of English, and then, MLitt and PhD in English Linguistics & Phonetics. At the CIEFL, I learnt how languages were similar and dissimilar, and how one should learn and teach languages.

From CIEFL, I went back to Ranchi in 1984. The non-academic decisions made for the universities in Bihar during the Emergency pushed its universities into endless financial and academic chaos, making sessions, payments, and career growth of faculty uncertain. I left Ranchi for IIT Madras, and stayed there till my retirement in 2015.

Soon after going to IITM, I got a fellowship for some advanced training at Lancaster University to pursue a course titled Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The course was not very exciting, nor were the teachers stimulating, barring one or two. However, that brief stint provided exposure to English culture and later took me to some wonderful libraries in the UK. During this period I had the pleasure of having classmates from West Africa, East Europe, South America, and South East Asia and was exposed to their culture and appreciate their beauty.

In the hostel, I had neighbours from Ivory Coast, Gabon, Senegal, etc. They spoke French, and we spoke English.

I found IIT Madras to be as good as a great university. It allows its faculty not only to design their courses and experiment in learning and teaching methods, but also provides financial and infrastructure support to its faculty and students. I designed new courses like one in Spoken English<sup>4</sup> that taught more than pronunciation of sounds,

and another course in communication that took students to see how communication happened between pilots and air traffic controllers, and still another course in the History of English Language and Literature that included units from the Social and Political History of the UK. This course allowed students to see that literature is intertwined with the society of a particular period of history. In some of these courses, as in Spoken English, I was allowed to conduct a conventional examination. Presentations made by students were rated and treated as good enough.

In 1992, I got a scholarship to attend an American Seminar in Salzburg and a workshop in teaching languages online. Following Salzburg, I did an AICTE-supported 'Technology for Language Teachers Workshop' every year for the next few years. It became so popular that our last session in 2000 had over 100 teachers.

In 1995, I became an examiner and then an examiner trainer for IELTS at the British Council, Chennai and Mumbai. With this experience, I substantially modified the testing part of my courses at IITM, making them shorter, more reliable, and easier to administer. Tata Consultancy Service (TCS) in collaboration with us also conducted this test once on line at several centres simultaneously. It was not yet entirely without human assistance, but was a significant step in that direction. This also gave me confidence to do the training and testing of Air Traffic Controllers (ATCOs) in Civil Aviation English. Until 2010, Indian ATCOs went to New York, or Manchester, or Singapore for this training. But now they could undergo this training in India, saving the Airports Authority of India (AAI) a lot of money and time. I did this training and testing for nine years with high rates of success.<sup>5</sup> I helped expand the trainer-team of AAI from a few Chennai-based trainers to dozens across India. AAI still uses the training and testing manual designed by us. No matter which airline one flies today, the flight within Indian airspace is controlled by one or more ATCOs trained by us, Indian teachers of English.

**DL:** How do you describe your relationship with the different language spaces you work in?

**SC:** I have taught only English, but I have written in Hindi and in Maithili. Each language has its own unique world, and there are things that could be said best in one, but perhaps not so well, in another. I wrote my father's biography in Maithili. I have written in Hindi newspapers on issues affecting the people of Bihar in particular. I felt that it could

be done best using idioms we use in Bihari Hindi. Besides academic books and articles for publishers in India and abroad, I have also written for newspapers in India and abroad. They have been in English. That, however, does not mean that those reports could not be written in another language; it is simply that I preferred them this way.

Some of my teachers, even in Hyderabad, switched between languages, making their classes more interesting. Teaching how to teach grammar, one senior professor would take a sentence or two from Hindi to emphasise or illustrate a point. A sentence in the present perfect tense in English, for instance, can talk about some action whose effect can be seen in the present moment. The action has ended only just now. "Radha has cried. Look, her eyes are still red, *uskii aankhen abhii bhii laal hain!*", "Her eyes are still red", the Professor would say, enlarging his own big eyes.

I remember one also from Darbhanga. This professor used to teach Elizabethan literature. He would switch to Maithili when he was excited. He may not have taught us "English" stress, intonation and rhythm, but he certainly taught us to read and understand those great epics. When I interacted with classmates from some elite colleges and universities, the difference was starkly clear. Although we got Cs and Ds in courses like Spoken English, we scored As and A pluses in literary interpretation. By switching between languages, the teachers helped us develop an insight into the subject. It did not matter much which language they used to communicate the subject matter of the text.

**DL:** One of your well-known books is: Chaudhary, S. (2008). *Foreigners and Foreign Languages in India: A Sociolinguistic History*. Foundation Books. A considerable amount of work has gone into its making. Could you please describe that journey?

**SC:** Thanks for the compliments. Yes, while reviewing this book in the *ELT Journal*, Alan Maley called it a "magisterial work".<sup>6</sup> It took me nearly 10 years to research and write it. I was fascinated by questions like who those were that learnt English in India first, what language the British spoke when they came to India first, or what language other foreigners, before the British, spoke when they came to India, etc. I also had questions like who were the early learners, teachers and users of English and other foreign languages in India. What materials and methods did they use? How did they test the learners? What led to the

rapid growth of English here in India, unlike other foreign languages spoken here before? Many other questions arose in this context. I cannot say I have answered them all, but I could draw these questions to the attention of researchers. Today, many young people are working in this area.

Actually, my interest in all these questions arose from my *Spoken English course*. I was expected to test and award grades to students of this course, as it was done in many UG courses at the CIEFL. Besides, I was not happy with the existing tests. I designed some of my own, but not with much better results either. So, I asked how these things were done in the early days of English Language Teaching (ELT) in India. Then one thing led to another, and it seemed India had an old tradition of learning and using foreign languages. But nothing much appeared to have been done systematically.

I faced many difficulties. Did I know historiography, well-wishers asked? Did I have a suitable grant? There appeared to be plenty of materials, though scattered, in libraries and archives across India and many collections abroad. The temptation to begin was irresistible. Soon, I had a paper on the state of sources of this history based on a review of collections in the Raj Library of Darbhanga.<sup>7</sup> The Indian Institute of Advanced Study at Shimla gave me an associateship to help me pursue my interest.

In those days, I also worked as an examiner for the British Council (BC) in India, so I had a lot of free travel within the country. I went to Trivandrum, Bangalore, and Hyderabad frequently. Being in Chennai was a great help to me. In all, I suppose I went through at least 20 libraries in India, from Shimla to Trivandrum, and from Goa to Calcutta. BC and IITM also helped me with scholarships to consult libraries in the UK. Yet it took me nearly 10 years to come up with anything presentable. I could find some answers and could list some places that held these answers. In a recent article, I have indicated what sources one should see to write a better documented history of foreign languages in India.<sup>8</sup>

**DL:** The National Education Policy envisages the mother tongue as the medium of instruction till at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond. We have 22 regional languages, but thousands of other languages are spoken as a mother tongue. In a deeply multilingual and heterogeneous country like India, is it feasible for each person to be

educated in their mother tongue?

**SC:** Yes, and relatively easily! Any language can become a medium of instruction. All it needs is an attitude and some support. In North Bihar, also called Mithila or Mithilanchal, schools have to use Hindi, which is not the mother tongue of any child there. Maithili is used in schools, across the border in Nepal. Maithili has an old and rich literary tradition. It is now also listed in the Eighth Schedule. Yet it is unacceptable to the state government as a medium of instruction. If this can happen to Maithili, then imagine the fate of children from hills and jungles across India.

If a teacher has the permission and support to implement what is desirable, nothing else is required. Teachers can produce their own materials. Tests of learning would not and should not test the memorisation of texts they should test language ability as seen in listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

Other languages like Hindi and English would naturally be learnt for wider communication. Without them, one cannot go out of one's village and live a "normal" life. Even in Tamil Nadu, known as an anti-Hindi state, many people watch Hindi films, serials, television programmes, and learn and use Hindi. They know that Tamil alone cannot take them beyond Chennai and Kanyakumari.

Even in Bihar, where schools almost no longer teach and test English as a compulsory subject, English continues to be the only language learnt through private tuitions. There is too much legislation in education in India. It stifles initiatives and experiments, and throttles the system. People must be trusted, and incentives and punishments may be introduced.

**DL:** What will be your recommendations for the medium of instruction at different levels of education, such as School, College and University? Can we switch to Hindi and the 8<sup>th</sup> Schedule languages for higher education in North India? Also, how can we have a linguistically inclusive classroom and gain from the established correlation between multilingualism and cognitive growth?

**SC:** Autonomy and freedom for each unit strengthen the entity. Think of a body with a strong mind, but weak limbs! How well will such a plan work? Exceptions like Stephen Hawking are there. In God's world,

anything is possible, but shouldn't we strive for a better life, with all limbs of the body properly developed and properly functioning?

Allow me to cite an instance. The IIT system has been applauded worldwide for its unblemished record of commendable work for a long time. It is not that graduates of any IIT teach at IITs. Under eight per cent of them are there on the faculty; an overwhelming majority of faculty members there are like me, and they have come from less well-known places. But they have almost the desired financial support and a great deal of autonomy. Every teacher is free to teach and test the course the way they like. Neither the Senate nor the Director, let alone the government, has the power to tell them how they should work. The result is there for all to see. Why can we not use it all across the country? Teachers must be allowed to work as they feel best.

Given a choice, institutions, which are groups of teachers and students, should decide what is best for them. Hindi, in my opinion, is the most widely understood second language across the Indian sub-continent, but I am not sure if it is the best medium of instruction for higher education in many subjects other than perhaps literature. Hindi can also be held guilty of blocking the development of appropriate culture for education and communication in many other non-populous languages, just as English has done to Hindi over the last century and a half. If Legal Studies, for example, can be conducted in Hindi, they can also be done in Bengali, or Maithili or Dogri, etc. All of them will have to draw the required jargon from Sanskrit and/or Persian, just as Europe draws from Greek and Latin, or the Islamic world does from Persian and Arabic.

**DL:** What is your advice to the language teachers of this country for teaching languages?

**SC:** Regarding teaching languages, the answer is as old as education. Every teacher is obliged to make themselves available to their students. In other words, they have to teach only one thing—how to learn a subject, or find an answer. If a teacher has done that, the teacher's work is complete. This is true of education in languages as much as of education in Mathematics, or in Fine Arts, or any other subject.

**DL:** 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 the linguistic rights of minorities? Would you recommend that we have a single language as a marker of our national identity?

**SC:** India does not have only one national language. The government can have only one or two official languages, and, depending on the preference of groups or individuals being informed, copies in other languages can be done in nearly in no time and at almost no additional expense. Today's Computer Science and Engineering makes these things easily possible. Rather than print a million copies only in Hindi, the printer can be told to print some in Marathi, Maithili, etc.

For communication at a larger level, Hindi and English seem more useful. For communication at the all-India level and beyond India, English does not seem to have a substitute just now. But once again, this is just a mindset. Two people willing to speak to each other can always find ways to do so. It is a question of practicality. It will be cost-effective to use available solutions. But creating new ones can be inclusive and more beneficial in the long run.

Many countries even today manage without English, and with languages spoken generally within their territories. But, ideally speaking, each country needs a language for global as well as for local communications. Fortunate are those who can manage all these chores with one language. Others, for historical reasons, seem to have little choice.

### Notes

1. He also subscribed to and read Bangla books and journals.
2. It is defunct now, but it was then the influential and leading English daily published in Bihar, Jharkhand and Eastern UP.
3. Now it is called The English & Foreign Languages University (EFLU).
4. Chaudhary (1992/2000).
5. All trainees eventually had to pass a test designed by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).
6. <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/64/1/116?maxtoshow=&HITS=10&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&fulltext=january+2010+issue&searchid=1&FIRSTINDEX=0&resourcetype=HWCIT&eaf>
7. Chaudhary, Shreesh (2002: 65-78).
8. Chaudhary, Shreesh (2024: 141-150).

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