

# R. Amritavalli (RA) talks to Chiranjiv Singh (CS)

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Amritavalli is a theoretical linguist with an interest in first and second language acquisition. She has retired from the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, and lives in Bengaluru.

Chiranjiv Singh has been called a “Renaissance man”. A former Ambassador of India to UNESCO in Paris, Singh is an administrator with a keen interest in art, literature, music and languages. He retired in 2005 as additional chief secretary to the Government of Karnataka, which honoured him with a “Rajyotsava” award. He has been President of the Alliance Française, Bangalore, receiving the French knighthood, Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite; and served on the governing bodies of the Indian Institute of Science and the Institute of Social and Economic Change (both in Bengaluru).

Impelled by a love of literature, Chiranjiv Singh has acquired and learnt to read a dozen languages in addition to his native Panjabi, namely Bangla, Gujarati, Hindi/Urdu, Kannada, Marathi, and Tamil, apart from Arabic, English, French, and German. When he looked at the theme statement for this issue of *LLT*, his immediate response was that the municipal workers and shop assistants around his home in Bengaluru spoke at least three or four languages that they had learnt on their own. A Tamilian, for example, would speak Kannada, and Hindi and English, as would a person from the north-east of India:

**CS:** Yes, in India it is happening all the time. Because in many cases, the mother tongue is different from, you can say, the bazaar or the outside language. Even in what we consider the Hindi heartland, for example, the mother tongue could be Bhojpuri or Maithili, which is different from the standard *sarkari* (official) type of Hindi, that is, the Rajabhasha. So, most Indians would be in that sense bilingual in any case.

Some of those who are known for going out, like Panjabis, Malayalis, Gujaratis, they tend to pick up the local language and it's normally through informal settings. They intermingle with the people and often it's a process of linguistic osmosis. In many cases, for work purposes, for business, they need to learn the local language, and they do it. It happens all the time in India.

In my case, when I came to Karnataka—I came to Karnataka at the age of 25—the official work was done in English. There was no pressure to learn Kannada as such. In fact, many of the previous generation[s] of IAS officers from other states never learnt Kannada. I was interested in languages myself from the beginning, so that's a different matter; but otherwise, we had no arrangements for teaching Kannada. When I was in the Administrative Training Institute [ATI], I

got the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore to prepare Kannada lessons for outsiders, IAS, IPS, IFS, which they did. Now, anyone coming from outside is given a thorough grounding in Kannada at the ATI, but in our days, this was not the case.

So, when I learnt Kannada, I first started listening to Kannada songs and then seeing Kannada films: starting with mythologicals, because there you know the story. If it is *Lava-Kusha* or *Sita Kalyaanam*, you know what is happening; and fortunately, I am still very fond of mythologicals and folktales, because in our childhood, we were permitted to see only mythologicals and folklore films. So, these I started seeing in my first posting, and I saw all those films, *Katthari Veera*, *Jagadeka Veerana Kathe*, etc., any folklore or mythological film. Then I learnt the alphabet, and after that I stopped getting English newspapers and started taking only the Kannada newspapers and reading them. Basically I learnt Kannada from films and songs. The songs - you see, you remember the tune, and P. B. Srinivas became a great favourite of mine; so if a song was playing, "*be[adingal]ina nore-haalu koḍadali tumbi tando[le]*" ["The foaming milk of moonlight she has brought filled into a pitcher"], I would ask what is *koḍa*, they would say [pitcher]. *Malligeya hambu* is the (jasmine) creeper—so like that you build up the vocabulary; but I never had any lessons in Kannada as such. No formal learning.

**RA:** But now you read Kannada literature.

**CS:** I do, that is because as I said I was interested in languages from the beginning. It was something I can't explain, because even as a child, in my 6th or 7th class during summer vacation, my hobby was to create new scripts. So, the interest in languages was there, but my learning in Kannada was informal.

Whereas, German I learnt formally; but

French again I learnt informally when I was posted in France. Before that, in 1960, my father had got Hugo's French language course, you know, Hugo's courses, so those books were at home; and I had done matriculation. In between matriculation and college, you have three months' time, so I started reading those French books. It was informal self-teaching, but later on I was posted to Paris. For three and a half years I was there, but again it was informal learning. I never attended classes as such.

Other languages also, when I was posted to Belgaum, I learnt Marathi. As Marathi script is the same as Hindi, that was not a problem. Again, listening to Marathi friends' speech, and taking Marathi papers, and Marathi magazines, and I started reading Marathi literature; and I am still getting a Marathi newspaper – Similarly Gujarati, I picked up on my own because again –

**RA:** Were you posted in Gujarat?

**CS:** No, I just picked it up. I mean I was in Ahmedabad for three months once, and my host was getting Gujarati newspapers, so one fine morning, I just picked up the papers and a couple of times I would ask them, what is this or what is the meaning of this. Otherwise, I was on my own, and now (gestures at his bookshelves) there you can see Gujarati books there – K. M. Munshi's –. So, I mean most of the language learning in my case has been through informal means – Urdu again, of course at home, my parents taught me the Urdu script.

**RA:** Was Panjabi at one point written in Urdu script?

**CS:** Here on this side it is Gurmukhi, in Pakistan, it is what they call Shahmukhi which is modified Persian script. So, I started reading Urdu and wherever I needed to ask something, I would ask my

father or mother.

**RA:** Your home had (as you mentioned elsewhere) Persian, Urdu books ...

**CS:** Yes, I was fortunate in that sense because both my parents knew three-four languages, and they were both fond of reading. I grew up in a house with books around me. When I was to be put into school, the best school in that area was just across the road – like these shops opposite. So, I was put in that school, and that was the Anglo-Sanskrit High School – Hindi medium, with Sanskrit compulsory!

**RA:** It was called the Anglo-Sanskrit High School? Which city?

**CS:** Its name is Anglo-Sanskrit High School. Khanna, in Punjab. A.S. High School, it is quite a famous school.

**RA:** It was Hindi medium, but called Anglo-Sanskrit!

**CS:** Because Sanskrit was compulsory.

**RA:** English and Sanskrit were compulsory.

**CS:** Yes. It was Anglo-Sanskrit High School, A.S. High School. The mother tongue was Panjabi, the first language in school became Hindi, and I was taught English at home, so it was quite a linguistic mix. Most of the language learning in my case has been informal. Like in many cases in India, people learn informally.

**RA:** Except for German, you said.

**CS:** German, yes, German I learnt formally, because I had gone to Germany to do Ph.D., but then I got selected in the IAS, so I came back.

**RA:** What were you going to do a Ph.D. in?

**CS:** Linguistics.

**RA:** Linguistics! Oh, our loss! Where in Germany?

**CS:** Heidelberg.

**RA:** Heidelberg, oh my goodness.  
(laughter)

**CS:** So, I came back, and during the period that I had to write the exam and wait for the results and interview, etc., those five-six months, I taught German in the Panjab University, because the German teacher had gone back to Germany, and she recommended my name, so I was appointed straightaway as German teacher.

**RA:** So, you took courses?

**CS:** I took courses in German.

**RA:** How [Where] did you study German? In Heidelberg?

**CS:** No, no, in Goethe Institut. Actually, when we were in Libya—my father was posted in Libya—I joined Goethe Institut's classes; and there I [also] picked up Arabic because we were in Libya and Egypt.

**RA:** So, is that script different, the Arabic, from the Urdu script?

**CS:** No, Urdu is a modified Arabic-Persian script, because of additional sounds which Arabic does not have; for that they have additional symbols.

**RA:** So how many languages do you know? About twelve, I was told; or more than twelve?

**CS:** Actually – twelve, thirteen, or so.

**RA:** "Twelve, thirteen, or so" – you have lost count! And we have trouble teaching three in school!

**CS:** At this age, if somebody asks me how many do you know, I say I am in the process of forgetting many!

**RA:** Because you wanted to read literature, so – you picked up the script also.

**CS:** Basically, yes. Marathi because I wanted to read Marathi literature; Gujarati, Kannada, Hindi, Panjabi; Sanskrit was there, Bangla. Yes, Bangla I learnt on my own because I wanted to read Tagore in Bengali. No translation does justice to Tagore. So I learnt Bengali. Actually, I had gone to Bengal for a camp for one month. During that period, I learnt the alphabet there, and then continued.

**RA:** Continued by reading the literature? Or newspapers?

**CS:** I ordered this book, *Teach Yourself Bengali*. Having learnt the alphabet, [I learnt a] bit of grammar from *Teach Yourself Bengali*, and then I was on.

**RA:** So, you went straight into Tagore?

**CS:** Straight.

**RA:** So, for you, the language is visual as well as auditory.

**CS:** Yes, yes.

**RA:** You seem to have mostly picked it up, by looking at it as well as listening to it—after your twenties and even later. You know there is this popular belief that

children should be put into English medium schools as early as possible, English is very hard to learn later...

**CS:** I don't know – you see, I was sent to school at the age of six, because my grandparents thought I was too weak physically to go to school. I was with my grandparents. But at home, they started teaching me the English alphabet, and the result was, we attended a wedding, this is before I joined the school, and you had those lights, you know, the moving lights. "Welcome" was written in those moving kind of lights and I was wondering, I asked somebody, "Welcome? 'Well' is *baavi* (Kannada for 'a well'), the *kuan* (Hindi for 'a well'), why are they saying, "Come into the well?" Everybody started – laughing! So, we spoke Panjabi at home, I was taught English and Urdu script at home. By the time I joined the school, at school it was Devanagari – but I don't think you have to put children into English medium schools, I am not in favour of it. English from the 6th standard or 5th standard is good enough.

**RA:** That was indeed the recommendation, officially, by all the English teaching bodies – and the basic subjects should be taught in the mother tongue up to the 10th standard?

**CS:** Absolutely. India is signatory to the UNESCO convention on mother tongues, so I don't know why this is not being taken up more seriously, that medium of education should be the mother tongue.

**RA:** But can I play Devil's advocate here, and tell you that even the mother tongue is not taught in such a way that it is properly learnt?

**CS:** Because, you see, enough attention is not being paid to teaching in the mother tongue.

**RA:** So what should be the thing we do?

**CS:** You need to have schools in Indian languages which are comparable to English medium schools. When I had to put my children in school in Mysore, I was then posted at Mysore, I asked the District Education Officer, I want a good Kannada medium school, because I wanted the children to go to a good Kannada medium school. But after going around, he came to me and he said, "Sir, there is no good Kannada medium school", so I put them in St. Joseph's which is English medium. I said all right, they have gone to this but at least let the first language be Kannada.

Now, here the question is you don't have anywhere in Karnataka good Kannada medium schools which are comparable to good English medium schools. This is one problem, and this is not only in Karnataka, it's all over. Except, perhaps, in Maharashtra. I have a friend in Pune. He came back from America after many years, and we were talking, he had to put his daughter in school, and this is one of the reasons why he returned. So I said, "Sushrut, put her in [a] Marathi medium school, and she would in any case, learn English. Otherwise, she would not learn Marathi". So he put her in a Marathi medium school. Everybody thought he was spoiling the child's future and all that, but he is so happy now. He said she has learnt English in any case, she is very good in Marathi and as a bonus, she has learnt Hindi because the script is the same...Which means Pune has at least one good Marathi medium school, which somebody coming back from abroad can put the child into.

**RA:** So when we say "good", what do we mean?

**CS:** Good, I mean in both academic terms as well as physical infrastructure.

**RA:** Academically? Some sense of a

modern approach to what learning means, or involves, which is missing?

**CS:** Yes, also text books, which is another weak point in Indian languages.

**RA:** So you do need to modernize?

**CS:** Definitely, both the subject and the content. You see, the other problem in our textbooks is, instead of making children learn the language and make the content interesting for the children, we want to make the books didactic. You have to sensitize them to this, you have to sensitize them to that – at a later stage it is okay, you can say from 5th standard onwards, you can talk of gender equality, environment, etc., but until the 5th class, why do you have to bother about that? In fact, whenever I was learning a new language, fortunately, *Chandamama* was published in all these Indian languages, I would subscribe to *Chandamama* in that language.

**RA:** Which is a child's magazine, or mythological ...

**CS:** Yes, I think there has been no publication like *Chandamama*.

**RA:** It has stopped now?

**CS:** It has stopped, unfortunately stopped many years ago.

**RA:** This is an important thing, because to give it a professional label, it is called age-appropriate material. And nowadays, there are so many misconceptions about how children should be taught language. One misconception is that books should not have pictures. I have actually come across this.

**CS:** Should not have pictures? What on earth for?

**RA:** Because, they said, it distracts them from the text.

**CS:** No, the book should be as beautifully produced as possible. It should be attractive to hold, attractive to see. *Panchatantra* is our great example, *Hitopadesha*, *Panchatantra*. Because these naughty or silly princes would not learn anything, Vishnu Sharma was asked to give lessons, and those stories are still great, absolutely. With that example in India, we still have this kind of thinking, I can't understand. Such lovely folktales, such great fairytales in India, such a wealth of traditional narratives, and in the 3rd standard, we have to talk about teaching children this or that! First let them learn the language.

**RA:** You know, we talked about the success of our people in learning languages informally—we were talking about the *paurakarmikas* and the shop assistants. But somehow, when it comes to school and learning languages, all these natural learning language abilities are thrown away, switched off.

**CS:** Yes, the teachers need to be re-trained, the language teachers need to be re-trained, and the textbooks need to be re-oriented. As I said, at least up to the 4th or 5th standard, don't try to be didactic. Just make it interesting.

If you want to teach about cleanliness, there are any number of stories even in our folktales about cleanliness. Pick one of those. You don't have to, at the end of the story, say "Moral!" which I have seen earlier in some textbooks, there would be a story and at the end, "Moral."

Language books, especially for children, should not be didactic. They should be interesting. You can have in Social Studies all your ideas about environment, that can come in there, but why in language teaching? I remember in my

children's 3rd or 4th standard Kannada book, there was a lesson on Lal Bahadur Shastri in which it was mentioned—in a 3rd standard book!—that he did not take dowry. You are talking to a 7- or 8-year-old child, and you're saying [this]. First, why have a story on Lal Bahadur Shastri? And then, why have this, that he did not take dowry! This is the problem with our textbooks for children.

**RA:** Written by adults for adults, it does not take the child's perspective.

**CS:** When we have *Hitopadesh*, we have *Panchatantra*, we have such a wealth of folktales, and you have to say so-and-so did not take dowry in the 3rd standard text book!

**RA:** Is it some anxiety to make the child a small adult? I think there are two views of the child, one that the child is a kind of Wordsworthian Father to the Man, a Rousseau kind of idea; and the other, which seems to prevail now, that the child should be moulded as soon as possible into a miniature adult. Do you think that might be one of the problems?

**CS:** You see, the span of childhood is shrinking. You have children who at the age of 2 are almost addicted to smart phones because the parents use smart phones for keeping them occupied, and this loss of childhood, to my mind, is one of the tragedies of the modern age. Let children be children. That is why in the Scandinavian countries and countries like Switzerland, the minimum age for school children is 6. Unfortunately, I think because of the hold of the English language, we don't know what is happening in Finland, because we have no connection with Finnish or Swedish, or what is happening in Switzerland.

In the entire world, educationally Finland is supposed to be number 1, followed by other Scandinavian countries, and school

admission is at the age of 6. Before that, it is just nursery, playschool, etc. Now, in Europe—I have seen because during my postings in Europe my children went to school there—the pressure goes on increasing as you go up, and the maximum pressure I have seen is at the Ph.D. level. In India, the maximum pressure is at the +2 stage! Which is—something is totally wrong with our educational system, which has its impact on language teaching also. Language should be learnt naturally.

**RA:** But what about children who may not have the home advantage?

**CS:** I am a founder trustee of an NGO called Sampark. It's a 27-year-old NGO. Now, we are working with children of migrant workers. And these are mostly construction workers and they come from Odisha, they come from Tamil Nadu, they come from Andhra. Also, now increasingly from North Karnataka. And we see that the children—for example the mother tongue would be Oriya, but here the child is exposed to Kannada also, and given the opportunity, the children learn. Except that it should not be forced. Force feeding should not be there.

We are not bothered about English at this stage, because most of the teachers here who work with these children are Kannada speaking teachers. So obviously, the teaching begins in Kannada. Some of them know Hindi, so those who come from Jharkhand, and all those children, it's a mix of Hindi and Kannada, etc., and the children learn. The children learn because this is an informal setting, and not a school with a teacher with a stick. Children learn, and we are happy with the progress of the children.