

# Interview

**Mahendra K. Mishra (MKM) talks to  
Professor Debi Prasanna Pattanayak (DPP)**

Debi Prasanna Pattanayak, Founder Director (retired) of the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore, helped to place India on the international map of language studies. He is a highly respected sociolinguist and social scientist and has consistently fought for the cause of mother-tongue education. In his 1985 article he said:

*Like air and water, language is indispensable for human society. When natural water is so parcelled out that a section of the people is deprived of even drinking water, or natural air is so polluted..., then this is the sign of an unequal society. Similarly when a society is denied full expression through the language which is used naturally and its needs are instead sought to be met through a regulated or imposed language, then inequality sets in.*

Pattanayak was awarded the Padma Shri in 1987 for his contribution to formalizing Bodo and getting it added to the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India. He also worked on the research documentation on Odia that led to Odia acquiring the “classical language” status. Pattanayak is a prolific writer and some of his widely read works include: *Papers in Indian Sociolinguistics* (1978), *Multilingualism in India* (1990) and *Multilingualism and Mother–tongue Education* (1981).

**Mahendra Kumar Mishra (MKM):** What led you to choose linguistics as a discipline for your profession? Who were your mentors? Could you name some eminent linguists of your time?

**Debi Prasanna Pattanayak (DPP):** During my childhood, we moved about a lot as my father was banished from the princely state of Tigriria (now a part of Odisha) when he was working with Gandhi. Because of this mobility, I was exposed to several dialects and was disturbed by the marginalization of people. I began to feel that language was a major barrier in accessing governance, legal processes and education. I also wanted to come closer to the language and culture of people and so decided to do my Masters in Odia. I attended four summer/winter schools to study Linguistics and acquired a Diploma in Linguistics from Deccan College, Poona. At that time, there were no postgraduate courses in Linguistics. The UGC took a decision to treat the two-year-diploma in Linguistics as equivalent to a Master’s degree in Linguistics. I was selected for the Rockefeller scholarship

for a one year course in Linguistics. Subsequently, I acquired a three year Diploma in French, a two year Diploma (M.A.) in Linguistics and a Ph.D. in Linguistics from Cornell University. Prabodh Bagchi, the Indologist, who invited me to Shantiniketan, was my first mentor. Other prominent mentors were S. K. Chatterjee, S. M. Katre Director of Deccan College (Poona) and Gordon H. Fairbanks. Fairbanks was my research guide at Cornell University and it was he who helped me with my transition from Shantiniketan to the American Institute of Indian Studies. Eminent linguists in India at that time were S. M. Katre, S. K. Chatterjee, T. P. M. Pillai, T. N. Srikantaiah, G. J. Someyaji, Babu Ram Saxena and Biswanath Prasad. Their supporting hands in India included A. M. Ghatage, Sukumar Sen, Agesthialingom, H. S. Biligiri, Bh Krishnamurti and Brajeswar Verma. Across the world, C. F. Hockett was the luminary and Chomsky was just beginning to be heard. J. R. Firth, Michael Halliday and John Lyons were rising to eminence in England.

**MKM:** After coming back from the USA how did you pursue linguistics?

**DPP:** On my return from the USA, I rejoined Shantiniketan with the hope of setting up a department of Linguistics that had been sanctioned by the UGC. Since this did not happen, I decided to quit. I got two offers—either to join as a Reader at IIT (Kanpur) or as the Chief Linguist at the American Institute of Indian Studies. I decided to join the latter.

**MKM:** When you took over as the Director, CIIL (Mysore), what was the status of linguistics as a discipline?

**DPP:** Modern linguistics was established by the training programmes instituted by the Rockefeller Foundation. The department at Delhi University was the first centre to be established with the support of the Ford Foundation. Osmania and Annamalai universities were soon established following it. The Departments of Linguistics in Kolkata, Delhi, Guwahati and the Hindi region started flourishing. Linguistics was introduced in the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (Delhi) and All India Institute of Speech and Hearing (Mysore). Linguistics was strengthened in Kendriya Hindi Sansthan (KHS) (Agra) and Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL) now named English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) (Hyderabad). I had a positive and constructive role to play in all these institutions.

**MKM:** In what way was the role of CIIL (Mysore) different from the departments of linguistics elsewhere in India in the promotion of languages and linguistics?

**DPP:** CIIL was the apex institution in the country. Its role was to develop a coordinated

language policy. To enable this, the Director of CIIL was a member of the Governing Boards of KHS and CIEFL. The CIIL started its branches across the country in different states. It coordinated and supported the language development policy activities in the states. The CIIL also supported and coordinated linguistic research in universities and UGC. It also advised NGOs (Non-Government Organizations) and directed their activities to be in consonance with the overall language policy of the country.

The other important role of CIIL was to foster national integration through language. To work towards this goal, CIIL took positive steps for the implementation of the Three-Language-Formula. A consequence of these efforts was that the Government of India took a proactive role in language planning and also came up with a new initiative for the study of endangered tribal languages. It initiated a new policy for preparing readers in the languages of the tribal groups. The publication *Towards a New Language Policy* received acclamation from the UN. After three years of the establishment of CIIL, the Government of Nigeria sent a high power delegation to study the CIIL, so that they could set-up a similar institution in their country. Linguistics started at the CIIL, gave a new perspective to language and literature. Unfortunately, today CIIL is reduced to a limited organization as it has removed itself from field work, whether it is from the study of endangered languages or the application of linguistics to the study of language use in education, administration and mass communication.

**MKM:** In what way is the language situation in India different from the rest of the world?

**DPP:** India is a multilingual and multicultural society. I have said in several places that there is a basic difference between the third world countries and developed countries. Linguistic

diversity in India is deeper and wider than in any other country. Its sociolinguistic relations are more complex. Indian civilization has survived because of the complementary nature of its different units and domains; different languages may usually be associated with different domains of activity. Whenever this is challenged by hierarchization, language conflict ensues. To the Indians, using many languages is the norm. Any restriction in the choice of a language is a nuisance and very the idea of one language is uneconomical and absurd. For developed countries, one language is the norm, two languages are a nuisance, three languages are uneconomic and four languages absurd. While western societies have a contract-based life, Indian society is relation-based. In Indian society, languages are complementary to each other, whereas in monolingual countries languages are hierarchical in nature.

**MKM:** How do you respond to the hierarchy imposed on language by people in power who consequently ignore hundreds of mother tongues?

**DPP:** Hierarchy is imposed on the complementary nature of Indian languages from time to time due to ideological reasons. I believe that the complementary nature of Indian languages is well accepted by the people in power since they come from the same background and they know that language plays an important role in achieving power. It is true that the administration and judiciary continue to function in English even though English is not the language of the people. Since there is no language policy in the country or in any other state, the gap continues to be there. The Three-Language-Formula as a programme was an attempt to come closer to the Indian languages. It was not a policy but a programme. It does not say anything about the place of learning foreign, neighbouring or classical languages in the school curriculum.

**MKM:** What is your opinion about Hindi as a national language? Why do people in South India not accept Hindi as a national language?

**DPP:** I believe that all languages of India including English are national languages. None is anti-national. Hindi is the national official language. Major Modern Indian Languages (MILs) are state official languages. People of South India are not against Hindi. Even at the time of the strongest anti-Hindi movement, the largest number of registrants in the Hindi courses of Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha was from Tamil Nadu.

**MKM:** Why do you think the mother tongue is important from a larger social perspective and in the domain of education?

**DPP:** Mother tongue is a relative concept. Mother tongue and other languages are two different things. There is no wall or boundary between them. It is the monolingual and monocultural countries that have conceptualized the boundaries between languages. In multilingual contexts such as those of India, Africa and Asia, there are no boundaries among languages since everyone is a multilingual person. But in monolingual countries, language boundaries are created. In multilingual situations, one can move from one language to another without breaking the cognitive or communicative flows.

A mother tongue is the expression of the primary identity of a human being. It is the language through which a person perceives the surrounding world and through which initial concept formation takes place. Further, a mother tongue gives equal opportunity to the large majority of people to participate in national reconstruction. It also gives greater access to education to all those who are still deprived. It frees knowledge from the preserve of limited

elites and enables a greater number of people to interact. The mother tongue also decentralizes information and ensures a free as opposed to a controlled media. It provides greater opportunity for political involvement to a greater number of diverse groups and defends democracy. In the name of standardization and globalization too we destroy our mother tongues. But the destruction of a mother tongue represents a situation of language inferiority where the dominance of the standard language of the privileged classes stigmatizes the mother tongues and acts as the passport to rank status at the end.

Mother tongue education is a matter of rights as well as a need for every child. It is established on sound educational principles. It is tested beyond doubt that a child well exposed to his / her mother tongue is good in other tongues also. Globalization is one kind of a mono-model.

**MKM:** What is the place of English in the Indian context?

**DPP:** Globalization has trimmed bio-cultural and linguistic diversities. That doesn't mean that we have lost our identity. People say that we should reject one language to learn the other. Another group of people says that English should be banished from India. This is where we go wrong. Rather we should say that English should be accepted as it comes from the linguistic realities of the country in the context of a modern spoken language or historically relevant languages. It is most unfortunate that English is seen as an instrument in the hands of the rich to exploit the poor; a sustained division of the society between the rich and the poor is visualized. English should be an instrument of connectivity rather than of division. I do not believe that English will replace the provincial languages. However, to what

extent English will supplement and complement Indian languages would depend on a large number of non-linguistic factors.

**MKM:** What is your position on tribal education and language?

**DPP:** Tribal people have been isolated and not allowed to participate in mainstream activities. If education and development are a means to self-development, then that's the purpose or goal of tribal education. We need to make space for the tribal people to participate in and not merely be an associate of the developmental processes.

**MKM:** How do you see multilingual education in primary school education? In what ways has multilingual education in Odisha contributed to the learning of children? What are its strength and weaknesses?

**DPP:** It is unfortunate that multilingual education is seen as tribal education. It is hoped that the limited multilingual education will sustain the tribal cultures and break their inferiority complex. Hopefully, it will make them part of the multilingual India. Multilingual education is not tribal education. The entire education system of the country should come under multilingual education. In fact, just as we have accepted the Three-Language Formula nationally, we should have accepted multilingual education as a characteristic of our national education system. With the addition of mother tongue, it then becomes the Four-Language Formula. With the addition of classical and foreign languages another language is added. Our educational system in any way is multilingual.

**MKM:** What are your views about second language acquisition in school?

**DPP:** There is a great confusion about second language acquisition. No language by itself is a second or a foreign language. Languages are defined as first or second on the basis of their introduction in schools. If English is introduced first in the central schools or public schools, it becomes the first language. In government schools, it may be second, third or fourth language. So when we use the word second, it is in terms of its pedagogy. I would say that a language which is taught in the classroom and needs external resources is the second language. A language confined only to the classroom is a foreign language. Whether a language is a second or a foreign language depends on the kind of environment in which languages are being taught. It means in one case, the external resources are available and in the case of the other it is strictly confined to the classroom. That is the difference between the second and foreign language.

**MKM:** Do you mean to say that the pedagogy used in a particular locality should be based on the linguistic realities of the teaching-learning situation?

**DPP:** Yes, for instance, the tribal people of Odisha speak a tribal language at home and use the official language Odia outside, and there may be a third language—a “market” language—which they may be using for communication. So the language pedagogy of those localities may be based on the linguistic realities of the locality.

**MKM:** Do you think that the Euro-centric linguistics research has helped Indian linguistic studies when you know that Indian linguistics has thousands of years of scientific linguistic tradition established since the time of Panini.

**DPP:** Euro-centric linguistic research is necessary as an alternative theoretical and methodological base. Since all our research was text-oriented, an emphasis on all oral language reminds us of our glorious oral history.

**MKM:** What is your objective for promoting the *People’s Linguistic Survey of India* (PSLI) when language theorists say that these collections are not at par with the linguistics discipline?

**DPP:** PSLI is the study of languages as understood and named by the people. It is different from a linguistic survey where languages are named by pundits and studied by linguists.

**MKM:** How do you see linguistics in maintaining the balance between human development and technologies in the current era of economic liberalisation?

**DPP:** When we were young, Marx was the gospel. It took almost generations to come out of Marxism, and think of an alternate socialism such as Euro-communism. Now economic liberalization and technology are the greatest challenge to social equity. I think that language is the best instrument for developing awareness. Indian society is a relation-based society. Western society is a contract-based society. Different economic strategies are used to break a relations-based society, one of them being foreign money in retail business. India is the largest retail society in the world, where for every eight Indians there is one retailer. By investing foreign money and building malls it is calculated to break the society. One study shows that Gujarati women prefer retail shops to malls to get a chance to talk to the shop keeper in their own language. Just as English is sought to

replace Indian languages, malls are sought to replace small shops. This needs to be explained to all those who are working for development. This can be understood only through language use for social justice.

**MKM:** What was your dream for linguistic development in India? Has it been fulfilled? What are the aspects you feel have been neglected?

**DPP:** Linguistics has to become relevant for development in our country. To do this, it has to go beyond the confines of the classroom. India is a multilingual and multicultural country. Such a country can be sustained only by accepting that each unit is complementary to the other. Those who believe in a dominant monolingual and monocultural society in the West try to break this complementary nature. This leads to language conflicts. Asia, Africa, Latin America are multilingual and multicultural. I have tried to maintain sustained development and resist the mono-model of the West. I believe that this is a continuous process. The dream, therefore, remains to be fulfilled.

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