Interview

Mukul Priyadarshini (MP) talks to

Krishna Kumar (KK)

A noted historian and sociologist of education, Prof. Krishna Kumar teaches at the University of Delhi. Perhaps his most significant contribution has been to make education a serious issue of public discourse. His critical engagement with colonial interventions, local voices and modern ideas will leave a lasting impact on the shape of society we see in the times to come. As the Director of the National Council for Educational Research and Training during 2004-2010, he pioneered the development of one of the most impressive documents of modern Indian education system in the National Curriculum Framework, 2005.

MP: In the Indian context what are the issues and concerns involved in 'language education' and 'language in education'?

KK: Language education has to do with what we do in the teaching of languages at different stages of a child's education, and the other term that you have used—language in education—that is a larger term. It includes the role of language in shaping the teaching of different subjects in a school curriculum. So this second term includes the nagging questions typically faced by societies that have been colonized at some point—questions regarding the medium of teaching. What language shall we use for the education of different subjects—the education of sciences, social sciences, mathematics and so on. These two are very distinct spheres of policy making in countries such as ours. I say this because in the world that colonized others—that we might call today's wealthier, so-called developed countries—these issues will not arise because their language education covers the territory of the second question as well. This is because the language that is most familiar to the child (and in many cases that is the language which is also used for political purposes and general communication in society) is also the language of education in all subjects; and distinctions are not made between sciences, arts, humanities and so on and so forth. So this is a very specific question, about how our history of colonial exposure continues to shape the ways in which we think about aspects of education.

MP: I raised this question because the issue of language across the curriculum has yet to gain recognition among teachers. We still think of language as a subject in our language classroom and that has nothing to do with a science classroom or a mathematics classroom or a social science classroom.

KK: You see on this matter, as you know NCF 2005 floated a completely new idea as far as India is concerned. You have just used the phrase 'language across the curriculum'. The idea of this particular phrase and its history is not very old. Even in the western world, the history of this phrase is barely three to four decades old, but in the context of India, its history is even more new. I think it should be seen as a very new phrase to be put into the mill of discourse; it will be a long way before 'language across the curriculum' idea will be seen as a worthwhile point of discussion in schools and policymaking circles; NCF has merely introduced it. This is because we have this very great commitment to the use of English as a medium of instruction in subjects where we feel that English is the language of mobility, and availability of material in English cannot be matched by availability of material in Indian languages. Therefore, how

can 'language across the curriculum' be adopted as an idea, because the teacher who teaches science is teaching it in a different language in a way, but in a more general sense, the idea still needs promotion? This is because although different languages are used for different parts of the curriculum we also need to look at what a language does in a child's life, in her cognitive life, in her way of using language to make sense of the world as well as her own experience of the world. If the science teacher is aware of the role of language in doing that, then I think the science teacher will become a better science teacher who will understand that even scientific terms have associations, have metaphors that are inbuilt; she will become aware that even in a physics or chemistry class, language has a developmental role and that without taking that role into account, science will be reduced to a set of technical terms to be crammed and utilized at given places. So the idea is worth promoting through discussions, trainings and publications etc., but it is a new idea that is going to take a long time since we have no tradition of discussing language related matters with people who are not teaching language in schools. And this is true of not just science and mathematics teachers but it is also true of humanities and social sciences. So there is a long way to go.

MP: 'Constructivism' as a term has been much in use in the past few years but it has been seldom practiced in classrooms. How would you visualize it and exemplify it in a primary and elementary language classroom?

KK: The current use of this term is unfortunately moving towards making it a slogan. In fact, constructivism represents a major psychological advance, which is not particularly new. It has been around at least since the 1960s. Basically, it explains how knowledge is formed in the human mind. The idea of using a constructivist perspective in teaching is to encourage children to participate in the functioning of the classroom by bringing in their existing knowledge and experience into the interaction that takes place between the teacher and children, and children and children. Unfortunately, we are not yet used to the idea of letting children exercise their agency in the classroom. And hence, there is a tendency to treat constructivism as a term, to mystify it as if it is some kind of mantra. In some ways, it is a kind of mantra for a country that continues to adhere to very behaviourist practices in its education system. In a language class, the idea of using children's experience by means of talking, and by letting them write in ways where they articulate their thought processes permits them to communicate in ways that reduce self-consciousness. These ideas are obviously very central to making language classes come alive. Good teachers have always used such ideas without calling them constructivist. I think there may be some challenge involved in seeing how a textbook based pedagogy can also become constructivist, because as I said earlier in this interview, the textbook has become a kind of cultural code and teachers are made to feel hesitant to depart from the textbook. They don't see the textbook as a forum, or as a means by which ideas and images can be invoked, which would permit a much larger sphere of interaction to become manifest in the class. If the teachers could use a textbook in that manner, then the children's experiences, their perception, their memories, their arguments all of these will get a chance to be expressed through talk, through writing, and the ethos of the class will then permit such personal data to become collective data by means of attentive listening, and that is all that language is really about. Language is about constructing a social, shared universe with the help of personal data that we articulate by means of talking and writing. I think if this living universe of language is allowed to recreate itself in the classroom you could call it a constructivist classroom.

MP: In spite of a different perspective regarding early literacy that SCERT, Delhi books in 2004 and NCERT material post 2005 advocate, *qaayadas* (alphabet books) are being used to teach reading and writing.

KK: Now you are talking specifically about **a** subject and about **a** language. I can analyse teachers' discomfort or comfort in terms of the hold on their mind of a certain perception of what is Hindi as a language, and the hold of a particular tradition of what he/she might regard as the only way to teach Hindi. And *Rimjhim* challenges both of these—it challenges our received knowledge about what is Hindi and it also challenges the established pedagogy of Hindi. Perhaps this teacher was responding to those aspects. The question of *qaayada* is related to a particular tradition of introducing children to the alphabet. Now we are shifting our topic from learning of a language to learning or teaching how to read; and in the context of teaching how to read, the entrenched assumption is that this is impossible without first introducing children to the alphabet and making them cram it. Now this is a very old tradition that comes to us from an orally dominated understanding of what it means to be literate. The idea that each letter of an alphabet has to be sounded out correctly in an accepted or received fashion, that this sound has to be associated with the graphic design of each letter of the alphabet—this tradition goes back a few thousand years. If you are trying to challenge that tradition, it cannot happen with one textbook called *Rimjhim.* You need a very solid rain and not just *rimjhim* rain! To challenge that tradition, you require a vast programme of teacher training that would go into questions of what the alphabet contributes to a language. You will have to rake up a wide range of issues about how children learn to read in order to persuade teachers to see that the alphabet is actually not the heart of reading. In fact it is possible not to be a master of the alphabet and yet be a fluent reader. So this debate is not really about *Rimjhim*, which is just one textbook that the NCERT produced. This debate is about a subset of the problem of the teaching of a language, and should be seen as such. Once again, I refuse to be dismayed by the fact that *Qaayada* is still selling. *Qaayada* represents a minimum of a 2.5 millennia old tradition. And we can't expect that tradition to go away in five years of the implementation of a document called NCF; it will take a much stronger, deeper effort and then it will take much longer. And in any case I am not sure we have any specific knowledge about how the teachers are actually using *Rimjhim* today after they have used *qaayada.* We don't know what kinds of interactions are taking place on that frontier of knowledge of the alphabet, and then introduction of *Rimjhim*. We need to know that because teachers do mix methods and approaches. If their goal is to make children literate, then teachers are very pragmatic and practical…and rightly so. Within the range of their own capacity and what they believe parents expect and what generally society expects, they are probably mixing a whole lot of things including this long held indigenous tradition of what it means to become a reader; the new ideas that books such as *Rimjhim* introduce with the help of poetry, and tactile and visual experiences; a lot of oral interaction in the classroom on children's own experiential life outside the classroom; and then cracking familiar kinds of settings with the help of texts which makes sense. The basic idea of *Rimjhim* is that all texts have some meaning for the child right from the beginning and I don't think this idea has been disliked even by those who are fond of *qaayada*.

MP: Schooling in our country is marked by a culture that silences children as soon as they enter schools. Often a chirpy and inquisitive child very soon learns to have control over her inquisitive and articulate nature. How is this culture of silence reflected and perpetuated by

the language of teacher - child interaction in the classroom?

KK: If you are calling it a culture that means it is a part of what is meant by the word *school*, what is meant by *education*, what is meant by *learning*. All of these cultural constructs that are embedded in the ethos of the school, I think, are responsible for what you are calling the culture of silence. The pedagogic culture in which this culture of silence is rooted is constructed in our system around the idea of the teacher being the person who delivers knowledge and the child being the receiver of knowledge, so it is this one way epistemic relationship that requires that the child be receptive, and by receptive is meant *silent* so that the child is able to pay full attention to what the teacher is saying. Now this kind of understanding of what knowledge is how it is learnt negates the way children think and the way they learn from each other; the way they talk, for example, enables a child to size up reality. Actually in chapter two of NCF 2005, many issues have been taken up which are about knowledge and learning. Once again, these ideas are anchored in cognitive psychology—what we call the cognitive revolution in psychology. Since our training programmes are by and large based on a behaviourist perspective, this chapter hasn't really gone very far in terms of wider appreciation even though behavioural changes in the teachers have been brought about to some extent. To some extent the system is showing awareness of this pedagogic culture that promotes the child's silence, but a deeper theoretical conviction in the teacher is needed if you want to totally break that culture and liberate the classroom from this culture of silence. Now that again, is a tall agenda especially when teacher training has yet to absorb all the ideas that are involved in child-centered learning—the kind of ideas which the 1986 policy of education was based on and what later some documents have tried to further open up. But I think if you look at the extent to which the primary grades today allow children to speak, it is a considerable movement. And I think it is spreading at higher levels as well. There is hardly reason to feel very despondent about it.

MP: We know a teacher is the agent of change. Her intellectual liberation and pedagogic empowerment is necessary for her to think and take independent decisions in matters of pedagogy, assessment etc. and not feel constrained to follow uniformly what she has been directed to do by the higher authorities. What can be done in this regard?

KK: First of all we need to recognize that we have seriously undermined the position of teachers. In fact your question sounds so romantic in terms of where we are today. We are in a much worse situation than we were even ten years ago in most parts of India, certainly most parts of northern India. But even in southern India, where teachers have suffered less in terms of loss of salary and in terms of status, a larger professional undermining of teachers has taken place. So the question of pedagogic empowerment doesn't arise. I think the primary issue is of healing the teacher after the injuries that the profession has suffered during the neo-liberal period of the last ten to fifteen years. We need to accept how significant and serious these injuries are that the profession has suffered. How to heal the profession has to be the first step, and once we manage to come to some consensus in that respect then perhaps we [can] talk about empowerment. One of the areas of healing has to be in teachers' training, which is an area that to begin with was very weakly defined and very tenuous. Even that weak definition has now weakened further. So today the sphere of teacher training looks much poorer than it was in the 1960s even as the system is looking for a far greater number of trained teachers than it

has ever before. Our national capacity to produce teachers through a credible teacher training programme stands seriously defeated and much more vulnerable to the vagaries of the market. Eighty percent of our teacher training institutions are in the private sector, and that too not in the organized private sector; they are in the unorganized private sector in the sense that those who are running these institutes are not serious industrialists or businessmen who are investing in education. They are using teacher training as a means to make some extra money and that's really one of the worst of all possible worlds. You have first of all allowed the State's role in this sector to be nibbled away, and secondly you have not even made the sector capable of attracting serious private investment. I think in this respect also the profession of teaching will have to be first assessed in terms of how much injury it has received during the recent new economic era.

MP: A few years back English as a subject was introduced in class I in the Government schools of many states. Now in Delhi, new English medium sections have been added in the primary sections of state owned schools. What is your opinion on these moves of the government?

KK: These moves are clearly very political and pathetic. They are meant to appease the poor who form the largest proportion of those attending government schools now, to feel as if their children will have more equal opportunity in the market by getting exposure to English in Grade I. Again it is a kind of romantic manipulation of the market that the Indian State is indulging in because the introduction of English as a subject is not going to overcome the gaps between English medium schools and government schools. It is not going to overcome the very serious backlog of attention to teacher training nor is it going to overcome the very significant problems of providing children with a very rich linguistic environment. All of these issues are not going to get resolved by that one period of English.

MP: Do you think there is a general decline in the discursive abilities of students? If yes, what would you attribute it to?

KK: Well, it is certainly a situation that needs to be inquired into by systematic research. In the absence of research what I will say will look like the observations of a teacher. Having said that, I have noted that the ease and the flexibility of students with English who used to come for our Bachelor of Education course or Master of Education course ten to fifteen years ago is not as evident in the students who are coming now. Today's classes are far more sharply divided between English medium and Hindi medium students, but this division also is not really reflective of what actually happens. The students' ability to use either language with ease and confidence is manifestly less evident. If this is what we mean by general discursive abilities, then I would say yes, there is a decline. What are the causes of this decline? I think only a wide-ranging research exercise can bring out some answers to this question. Personally I would have thought there are many reasons including the issues that have to do with the effort put in by teachers, and the security and confidence with which teachers work in today's environment. I think the decline in the teachers' own confidence and status in society has to do with the manner in which the process of learning is more and more restrictively defined as a preparation for reproducing in examinations what has been taught in the class. There is also the issue of the arbitrary use of communication technology as a substitute for learning over a period of time from different kinds of sources, and using language to make sense of what is learnt from these different sources. I think in our third world kind of setting, educational technology, and particularly communication technology has developed a kind of toy value

more than any educational value, and that has distorted both its potential and the goal of teaching at the level at which I teach. But these are all speculative responses.

MP: It is well proven by research that there is merit in introducing mother tongue or neighbourhood language as the medium of education in elementary schools. What in your opinion should be the medium of instruction in higher education—Hindi and other Indian languages or English, or both?

KK: A language is a repertoire of so many means by which learning is defined. Such a repertoire can only be developed in a language that is used by the largest number of people performing different roles in a society. That repertoire cannot be available in a language that is spoken by a limited number of people. And that is really what this question is at a deeper level. There needs to be no distinction at the deeper level between the language of maximized learning opportunities during childhood and the language of maximized learning opportunities during youth. The arguments for the two cannot be different except in an instrumentalist sense, which unfortunately we have made the only sense in a typical third world kind of post-colonial setting. Since we have a very instrumentalist view of higher education rather than a developmental view in the intellectual or psychological sense, we think that children should be allowed to transit to English language later on. I think these are problems of managing translation rather than conceptually authentic concepts/ideas.

MP: This is really a daunting task.

KK: I don't find it particularly daunting. The question is whether we accept that this task is worth attempting and whether we then achieve the platform and the institutional spaces where the task is taken up for deployment of both financial expenditure and academic or professional energy. If that consensus is achieved then the task wouldn't look as daunting; it's a highly doable task and is well worth doing. The question is of accepting its importance and then deploying resources both intellectual and financial to see to it that it gets done.

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