Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
Prof. Hemachandran Karah
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology - Madras

Lecture – 34
ISL Workshop Day 4 – Part 2
Talk by Prof. Tanmoy Bhattacharya on Sign Language and Linguistics

Prof. Hemachandran Karah: Tanmoy, there is one thing I realized was there are surface meanings and there are deeper meanings. We should be cautious whatever discipline we pursue, whatever politics we pursue. I think that is the broad message I would take from your presentation. I am sure we have lots of questions from the audience. We will take it from here.

Nita: Yes, so we had lovely participants and audience in the last 3 days asking very interesting questions. So, I am looking forward to questions today. I just wanted to mention a question that was asked in one of the days about sign language variation within India itself. And that was a very interesting question about whether someone from Tamil Nadu may find it very difficult to talk to someone from North India (both of them are deaf). So, we have the practitioner's view, being heard, he said it is not difficult at all. It is only probably an initial need for understanding the difference in that particular lexicon of that particular sign, but then later on things are free flowing. And you have given the same understanding through a linguistic perspective of how variations are not a deterrent for communication or understanding between two deaf people at all.

Prof. Tanmoy Bhattacharya: Yeah, so this is one point which probably requires much more discussion, but one thing that I can say which is related to this issue is regarding the so called stereotypes of sign language. One of the stereotypes is that they are much more uniform than spoken languages. So, that is one of the stereotypes of sign language and that stereotype emerges from this dominant idea that sign language uses something which is more 'iconic'. So, basically the common understanding of sign language is that these are a set of gestures. The common understanding is that we all engage in gestures and sign language users have more refined form of gestures, but that is of course far from the truth.

If you study sign language, you find that it is actually not that commonly iconic (iconic meaning that certain signs are very similar to the activity that the sign talks about); but that is not always the case. And there is quite a lot of discussion within the sign language literature trying to show that that is a common misunderstanding. But this common misunderstanding gives rise to the other misunderstanding, that therefore sign language is more uniform across the world; but that is also not true.

So, there are varieties of the similar nature that you will find in sign language. But it is true that because of the kind of modality that sign language uses - which is space - it is perhaps easier to figure out the differences quicker. You probably have seen two deaf people sitting at the airport start conversing immediately; that is the usual approach people have, but at the same time they will be able to actually communicate pretty soon, especially if your flight is delayed.

Then you actually end up learning the differences very fast. And because of the modality, you do not have the very things that I talked about today: the differences of sounds and differences of arrangement of words or the order of words; if you get rid of all those, then even spoken language would have been easy to figure out (so that you can communicate, not that you can completely sign the other language) within a few hours. You are able to communicate certain basic communication; it is possible to establish within much fewer time frame. So, you will notice this in sign language conferences. You would wonder how that happens in international conferences. They have some kind of international sign, but not everybody knows; so a lot of conversation outside the talks happen and through these kinds of intensive interaction where people figure out the differences across even major varieties (we are not talking about Chennai and Delhi, but major variety differences). I think that needs to be shown properly, but I think that is true.

Nita: So, we have questions coming up. One is from Sonal Sinha. She says, "We find linguists working on sign language. Are there some sign language speakers who are linguists?"

Prof. Tanmoy: Yeah, that is a very sad sort of situation, and that takes me to the whole politics of education; the dominant way that education is imparted and more or less all disabled people have similar experiences of the difficulties one faces while educating or going to university education or school education, but deaf people specially face much more problem because if you reflect a little bit, education is dominantly - especially in our so called eastern tradition - based on speech, so that is one of the issues which is very difficult. So, there are deaf students who are there in the classroom and they sort of go through it without raising an issue about it and they somehow cope with it and many people just fall out. So, their literacy of course is very less compared to blind students for example. And one of the reasons is not that deaf students are lazy or something, but because the dominant mode of imparting education is speech based. But things are changing quite a bit, quite clearly. So, we have not been able to get a deaf student in a linguistics; there are quite a few of course. I am talking about India, there are very few in India. Sibaji for example actually studied linguistics, but left the program because of this. He was admitted to JNU many years ago. And he left the program because of this whole issue that they are not sort of included; there is no accessibility. And when we started Equal Opportunity Cell in 2007 in Delhi University, we identified some deaf students for the first time and we provided support. Then we started sign language courses, etc. But it is not possible otherwise in a general classroom to make the changes that we want to make because of how the state of education is in a vast country like ours. But things are changing, mainly because the mode of education is also changing. So, you will find that deaf students are extremely good with computers, etc. that maybe this is also becoming a stereotype. But most of them are quite good with computers and they are able to get lots of things seen in the form of sign, and they are able to get lots of things otherwise through the internet, which was not the case earlier. The only problem is that you still need to be able to read and write, and that reading and writing itself is not happening the way it should happen. So, we tried in Delhi University this collaboration with deaf students. So when actually I started these courses, sign language courses, I insisted on having deaf teachers only. And it worked very well, and very good examples exist; one of my students did research and she got a job in ISL RTC. Two of my students, one finished a Ph.D., and the other is doing Ph.D. from Germany and they got employed into these sign language institutes to be able to impart knowledge through sign language. So these students started going to these university programs which were created for deaf students. And because they were more or less good in signing, they

are able to let us teach Economics, English and other subjects to undergraduates through sign. So, it worked. But then there are many other things; like in our country, it did not work after some time. So, this collaboration broke down. But ISL RTC is doing work and hopefully there will be more literate deaf students who are not only just good at computers, because not everything is available in the video format and sign format. He will still have to read so that I think they will be better and then hopefully there will be more people looking at linguistic structure of sign language.

Nita: Thank you for answering that and thanks Sonal for that question. We have Dr. Shweta Singh asking, "I just wanted to ask, rather say that when language is different for different regions or countries, then of course the sign language has to be different for different languages. So how can a person learn a global sign language? Is English a good option?"

Prof. Tanmoy: No, there is some problem with this question. First of all, it is not "of course", because this is another common misconception. Let us say, you will expect a deaf child growing in Tamil Nadu to have the same kind of cultural inputs that comes through language. Let us say this great venerable tradition of showing respect to the elders and all the morality is based on that; a lot of that we get through language from our culture, whatever culture you are in. But then the deaf child is actually deprived of that. So, in fact, the morality is bound to be different. And I have experienced this myself with not just deaf people, but also other disabled students as well; the sense of morality varies to some extent.

So, I may assume a Bengali deaf child to be 'Bengali' in that sense, but she or he may not be at all because they do not share the same cultural baggage - good or bad - with me, those cultural baggage which comes through language dominantly. There are certain things which are not through language to cultural festivities, etc. that are shared, but something which comes through language can be completely different.

So, there is nothing like "of course a deaf child growing up in Tamil Nadu will have a different language"; culturally the equation breaks down there already. Now, they are going to be different because of variation that exists in other parts like spoken language variation that exists and the

differences are majorly in naming - naming of objects, naming of processes, naming of actions etc. so that the labels that we do often and that comes out from within the deaf community. So, the deaf community in Tamil Nadu will have that variation not because of Tamil but because the deaf community itself will create that variety and that has been the case with other varieties as well. It is not that "Hindi is like that, therefore whoever is speaking or whoever is signing in North India will have this". But cultural things like putting a certain kind of bindi or a certain kind of way of wearing your sari, all the terms associated with those will differ because of the cultural things, but not everything in languages is culture based. So, this is one issue which we need to first of all understand.

Now regarding global language, so if you were there in my answer to Nita's ear;lier question, the first response that I gave was that there is something called International Sign Language which is usually employed during international conferences. For example, SIGN conference which is very well known. It was held in India also, sign conference there International Sign Language is used. And sometime there are special courses available for that. And you could say it is not really a global language as such like English is, but it is a language mostly for attending conference, etc. where people can understand each other quickly. When somebody is giving a talk, if they give it in ASL, and the audience uses ISL, then there might be an issue. But in day-to-day interaction, even interactions within the conference spaces and things like airports and hotels and all that, people try to figure out each other's language and because it is based on space as modality, not sound, there are certain things which are faster. Apart from the fact that, you have to have that kind of attitude that 'I really want to sign to this, communicate with this person', you also have the ability to figure out each other's signs, so they are the differences.

Nita: I also want to add to what Dr. Tanmoy said, that this is a common misconception that sign language is dependent on a spoken language and which is also a course or a way forward for the sign structures. So I think that is a big misconception that a language - be it sign language or any other language - is dependent on a spoken language. So no other language is dependent on any other language, sign language is also an independent one.

Prof. Hemachandran: The other way could be true Nita. Maybe, languages are hugely dependent on our capacities to use body expression, our kinetic, our movements, our reflexes, etc. I mean that is the point about universal grammar, I think. The other way may be true, but not this way.

Nita: So, yes we have a question from Ram. He says, "Sir, cannot we introduce some portion of syllabus on sign language in our regular school and colleges so that everybody can communicate basic thing with deaf persons?"

Prof. Tanmoy: Yeah, that is a very good point. In fact, some innovative teachers or school principals, etc. have tried this. It should be taken up as a policy. So it could be one of the languages on offer because especially now we have quite a few trainers; we do not have a lot, but quite a few trainers. And I think the government only has to make the adjustment in their thinking and think of deaf teachers. If we do not have deaf teachers, then it will be impossible. So, there is a misconception that deaf teachers will not be able to teach because they would not be able to hear what the student is asking. But that is actually not a sound conception because you get the best French education from French teachers who refuse to switch to English or any vernacular language, and that is the language immersion and acculturation and the idea of language learning. And the old method of rote learning or grammar learning is a very old method; it is not used at all. So, that would be a very good idea and one could introduce some very basic concepts which I think children will find very interesting and attractive. And children acquire this with not just fun and enthusiasm but without any bias; that is an interesting thing.

A long time back, I visited Amar Jyoti School in Delhi which was founded by Uma Tuli, and I noticed that there the sign language was not really used in the classroom. I went as a disability expert, not as a sign language expert as such, but we noticed that the deaf children who are outside the class when they are playing, they are just communicating with sign language. So, in the classrooms, sign language is not being used, but they sort of pick up and then they influence their peers - the hearing friends - to also pick up the sign language. So, many of the hearing children pick up sign language, at least the basic rudimentary sign language very quickly. So, this will be actually a great way to not only sensitize children; when these children become adult to disability issues right from the beginning. These days you have EVS in school where you have

some compulsory chapter on disability and in most cases those are still very full of stereotypical biased views of disability in general, but this will be a practical hands on kind of experience the children will understand the concept of disability much better. They will be more sensitive to people with disabilities and they will additionally learn a language. And if this happens successfully at a mass scale, then we will have many deaf teachers and sign language could be an alternative mode of education. Sign language could be your choice of so called other language in the third language formula, etc.

Prof. Hemachandran: Even Nita was considering this point yesterday in the discussion .

Nita: Yes. We are running projects in the rural areas of India to work with mainstream deaf children in the village government schools, where there is a community based approach that we follow to sensitize the school, the teachers, the peers, and where sign language is also taught to everybody to be able to communicate with even if it is just one deaf child in the school and be included in the assemblies. So, where the peers are actually learning it as another language, it is induced to them not from our rights based attitude, but we induce it like a child would like; learning a different language something that is very unique and you can talk secrets from people you know, hideaway things by talking in sign language from room to another and such things, just make it fun for them, and then they learn it.

Prof. Hemachandran: A peer-based based learning?

Nita: Yeah, that is right. Yes. And also I remember mentioning that in UK, now they have been advocating and lobbying for inclusion of BSL as one of the choices of languages that anybody can learn. That is already taken up if I am not wrong, so that is something that is inspirational for other countries.

Prof. Tanmoy: There is another issue which should be spoken along with this discussion, which is that since you mentioned UK there were this really poor boroughs of Brixton were one school adopted not sign language as such but general inclusive policies. So, inclusive policies which are designed for disabled children, in terms of teaching learning material, in terms of importing

education, etc. And it was noticed that within a few years that school became one of the top 20 schools in the whole of the United Kingdom; and it was a poor struggling borough of London where usually there were financial issues and poor children used to come. But after adopting this inclusive policy, the whole school sort of improved, not just disabled children within the school, but other children as well. And repeatedly some of us have shown in our writing and talks that it is not really an adjustment of the disabled child in the classroom that we have to do, but it is the whole classroom ethos that has to change. And that change which is triggered by let us say a deaf child or a blind child is actually something which is going to then improve the whole class itself, the whole class will benefit from it.

In fact, the one example that I gave is innovative teacher instead of drawing some kind of mythical animal on the board or talk about it in very many sentences, she just makes a model of it and passes it around in the school; many such teachers do exist in not just experimental schools, but other schools as well. Now if that becomes a dominant teaching-learning methodology, then you will remember that mythical animal even when you do not have to have any disability, but after 50 years also you will remember it because of the tactile sensation of that shape of that mythical animal that you had when you were 4 or 5. So, you will probably remember the word and although it is not culturally familiar to you, you still would know about it.

So that was one example which I normally use to show that this will aid in general improvement of education.

Nita: Thank you for those thoughts, sir. So, there are two questions still remaining here in the chat and they both are pertaining to linguistics and if I can just combine these two probably talk sign language linguistics in particular. So, do we have such a stream in India? And also the question is on, "can we put hands on computational part of linguistics apart from just phonetics and phonology?" And also the question is pertaining to "can we have a unit in the masters of linguistic class? There is all theory, but can we have been practical topics?"

Prof. Tanmoy: Yeah, why not. I mean, we have in our syllabus included sign linguistics that it is possible and within a sort of cumulative based system, one can easily do it even at the undergraduate level. Unfortunately, linguistics is not usually taught at the undergraduate level; that is another disadvantage. You get to learn mostly in universities at your postgraduate level in India. And then within 2 years, you sort of cram up all the topics of linguistics, and that is a problem. But it is possible to introduce it slowly. In Delhi about 20 years ago, they introduced this degree called B.El.Ed. (Bachelor of Elementary Education). It is a 4-year program and they introduced a couple of papers from linguistics or so. Advantage was that some of our students got jobs there, but also they could introduce basic concepts of sign linguistics there. And I think that would sort of prepare them for linguistic studies in a better way.

And of course, the same thing that I was saying about - introducing sign language at school level. Now, you could also introduce some of the deaf issues within that sign linguistics unit. So, somebody said that they learned it as part of the masters as sign linguistics, but just the theories, which is sort of unfortunate because just the theories are not going to help.

So as somebody asked, we do not have deaf linguists and Sibaji could be the only exception, who I do not know if he would like to call himself as a linguist still, but he did some linguistics at some point. And there was another person who came to our department, but quitted after some time because there was no support. And as I said the whole education system is biased against deaf people,

But certainly, another issue is that linguistics is a very scientific discipline. And it uses lots and lots of methodologies which are scientific, not just descriptive, so it uses lots of symbols and formula, graphs, etc. and tree diagrams (the thing that I do - syntax - is full of tree diagrams), so lot of graphs. So, all that need to find accessible format. And if you do not use those, then the teaching, the linguistics that you teach is not going to be really linguistics; it will be very diluted and that would mean just the basic knowledge of languages rather than linguistics. So, these issues are real issues that we need to work out. But as I said the hope is that because of technological innovations, we should be able to do this at a much faster speed and a deaf students will be able to access it in the format.

So, even if we do not have to wait for government policies, but just a teacher who is aware of the technological development can adopt that and set up an example of creating a module in sign linguistics teaching. So, there is one student who has been writing to our department for several years wanting to do a Ph.D. with me, and we could not take him because we always required grounding in linguistics first properly and then M. Phil. level research and then Ph.D. But if we can make certain provisions that the person who has otherwise will have deep knowledge of the sign language should be given certain kind of direct entry if they have the basic knowledge and basic idea of linguistics, even if they have not done an M. Phil. degree level program; if we make those kinds of adjustments and have more freedom, we should be able to produce deaf linguists sooner.

Nita: For when you say 'we', whom would you refer to? So, would it be the universities or..

Prof. Tanmoy: Yeah, I think it is from all sides. When I say 'we', I am talking about policymaker and activism both. So the first step would be to sit together with the university authorities. The first step will be to have the technological knowhow; first of all if it is available, that technology we can adapt; we do not need the university even to give permission for that. Then sit with the authorities because this is what we used to do in the Equal Opportunity Cell there. Case by case, we used to fight with the authorities. And I did myself personally not just for Delhi University, but for the whole UGC in 2014, we created a Disability Mission and the exam reform document where case by case we have to argue with the university authorities that these things should be allowed, let us say a deaf student whose mother tongue is sign language should be allowed to have a direct entry into this if otherwise found suitable in the basic linguistic knowledge etc. And for linguistics or other disciplines as well, we could do this.

But for each of these policies to develop at a local level, so at the university versus the let us say Equal Opportunity Cell of that university, that kind of thing that finally puts a push to a centralized body like UGC and then it becomes a policy. But the struggle has to come from our perspective, not from there. So, I think this is the kind of activism that we can afford to and we need to also get into.

Prof. Hemachandran: Yeah. Actually, I recall my accountancy teacher very fondly now. I am just giving a different kind of note on accessibility and accommodation. I was doing Commerce group in 11th standard. So, in accountancy class I used to keep quiet because I cannot see the board. So after the class, I went to him. "Sir, I want to come for a special tuition, I cannot see the board". He said, "I am sorry, I did not realize it". I went to a mainstream school for my 11th grade. Then in the next class onwards, he started articulating what he was writing on the blackboard; left - debit, right - credit, left - liability, right - property and so on. And he did that for a week and after that I told him ,"sir, I do not need the description anymore. All you need to do is tell the name of the nature of the transaction, I will be able to tell whether it is liability or property".

Even that kind of a method then it turned out to be not only great for me, but all my classmates . So, the point is this: accessibility will not come from anywhere; it is how we innovate with what we have. The updated technologies will come but it may not be available beyond Delhi or Madras. But we have to go for it, fight for it. But there are many other million ways of thinking about accessibility and accommodation. I am saying with fond remembrance of my accountancy classroom.

Nita: Thank you for sharing that. And thank you Dr. Tanmoy for answering all the questions. Thank you participants, for those questions that you did post. Over to you Dr. Hem.

Prof. Hemachandran:Great, Professor Tanmoy. So we not only talked about linguistics and sign language, but as usual about how to teach, how to arrive at policy decisions, how to do mentoring with personal examples, anecdotes. Again, I thought I was connecting with you as though I was in Delhi in one of those reading groups. Yeah. So all of you, participants here, I think we enjoyed being in the session and we look forward to our tomorrow's talk with; teaching signs for deaf children that is tomorrow's topic. Thank you all of you..

Prof. Tanmoy: I just wanted to put the message out that if anybody wants to get in touch with me my email is tanmoy1@gmail.com. So if any of the issues or any issues beyond this, I will be happy to respond. Thank you Hem for inviting me. This was a good discussion, I think.