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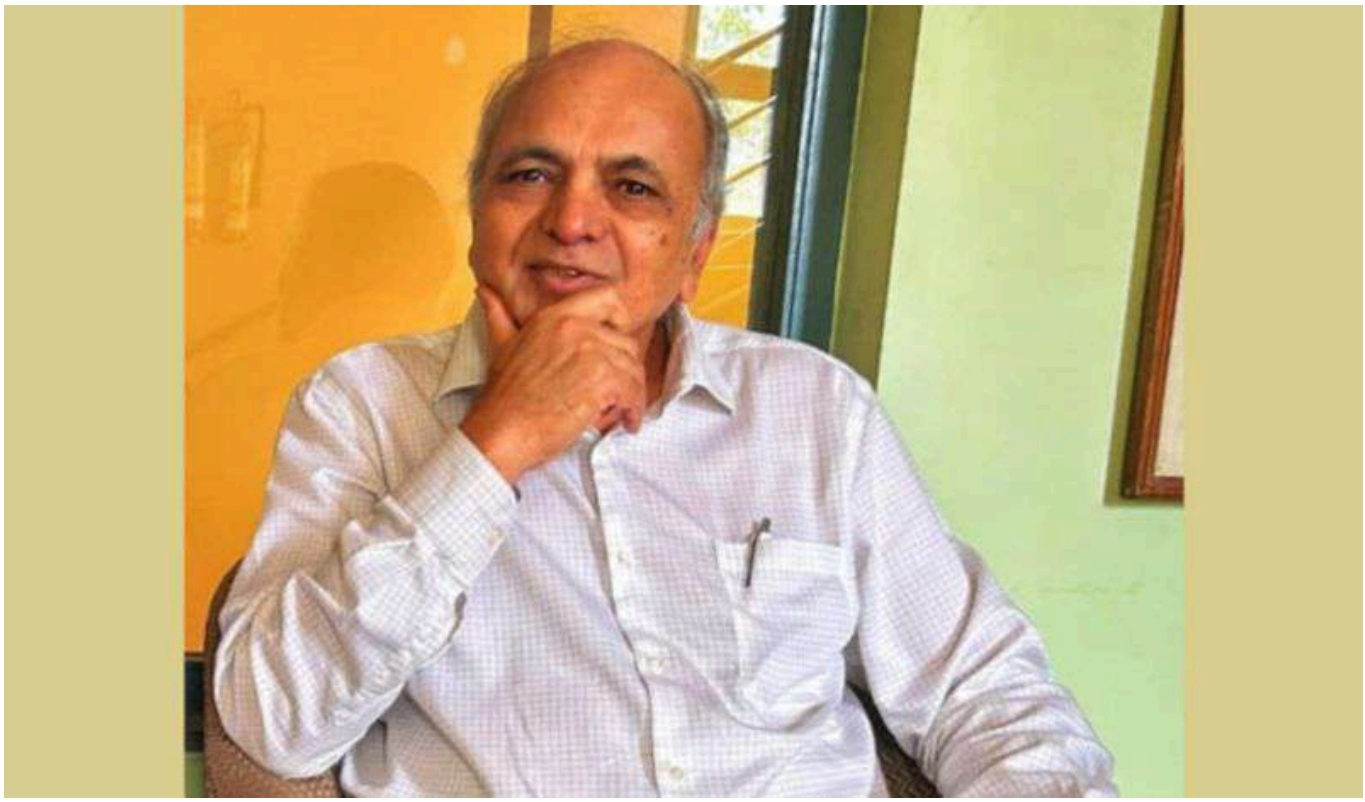
Interview | G.N. Devy: 'People Say They Encourage Innovation, Then They Glorify Tradition'

https://m.thewire.in/article/culture/interview-g-n-devy-people-say-they-encourage-innovation-then-they-glorify-tradition

Rohan Qurashi June 02, 2026



G.N. Devy. Photo by arrangement.

Linguist, cultural thinker and Padma Shri awardee Professor G.N. Devy is best known for leading the People's Linguistic Survey of India, which has mapped hundreds of living languages across the country and is considered one of the world's largest linguistic documentation projects. He is the founder of the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre and the Adivasi Academy, institutions dedicated to preserving tribal languages, cultures and knowledge traditions. Also known for having written and edited nearly ninety books on literary criticism, linguistics, philosophy and other fields, his After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism (Orient BlackSwan, 1993) *won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993. He has also received honours such as the Prince Claus Award, the SAARC Literary Award and the Linguapax Prize for his contributions to cultural and linguistic diversity. Rohan Qurashi, a research student at St. Stephen's College, Delhi, asks him to ponder over*

India's lost languages – over 220 forgotten in just the last 50 years. Edited excerpts from the interview:

India is home to an extraordinary range of languages, but many of them have been slowly slipping away over the last decades. How do you make sense of what is happening with the Indian linguistic landscape?

We have to understand that the issue of declining languages is not new, because languages grow, evolve and decline, and this has been happening for thousands of years. But what distinguishes our time is the pace at which this decline is happening. Among many other factors, the primary one is migration. Today, with the forces of globalisation, human mobility has increased tremendously. When people migrate, particularly for work, they don't carry their language with them in the same way. They adapt it to their changing surroundings.

They adopt the language of the workplace, the city, the economy. This happens because a language is not a fixed identity, but it is a social system. Individuals, when they move from one social system to another, often leave their original linguistic roots behind. The responsibility of sustaining a language then falls on the stewardship of very few people, and gradually, the number of speakers starts to shrink. As a result, the language declines, sometimes perishes, and at other times gets absorbed into neighbouring languages. What we are witnessing today because of the sheer scale of global migration, is a rate of language-loss faster than anything recorded in known human history.

Are we also witnessing a growing excitement around Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a tool for linguistic preservation? Do you believe it can actually make a difference?

See, for this we need to first understand what a language actually is. To give an example: consider a pack of cards neatly stacked in a box, and then consider a group of people playing games with those cards, which brings the cards into circulation. The cards themselves and the game being played are two entirely different things. Language works exactly the same way. It is not merely words, sentences or the pages they are printed on. A language is what happens when human beings take those words and put them into living circulation – when they speak, argue, joke, think and so on.

Also read: The Crisis Within Education: An Excerpt of G.N. Devy's Lecture Which IIT-B Cancelled

Now how much can the AI tools do? They can store, archive, suggest words, construct sentences and generate text. Unless a person is speaking to another person – unless there is a living exchange between human minds – it is not a language. It, in that case, becomes a record or keepsake of a language. Take the Oxford Dictionary as an example: it contains hundreds of thousands of English words, and it is written in

English, but it is not the English language. It is a storehouse of the English language, its words and sentences. A language truly becomes a language when it is used.

> Therefore, AI can definitely assist in the process of linguistic preservation, but it cannot, all by itself, preserve a language. Just like books are not languages but a mirror image of a language, not the language by itself. Just like a photograph is not the person it depicts, a recording or an archive is not the language it documents. Therefore, I believe that a language is a speech culture. It must be spoken and passed on – something that no algorithm can do for us.

How was your experience of language shaped by conducting the People's Linguistic Survey of India? How has it deepened your understanding of India's linguistic diversity?

I was very much aware of the linguistic diversity of our country as the Census of India (1961) had recorded as many as 1,652 mother tongues spoken across the country – such figures are highly indicative of how diverse this land truly is. But in the census reports that followed, this number underwent a downslide. This generated a great deal of uncertainty among many people, including me: are those languages dead? Had new ones emerged that were going unrecorded?

It was mainly this uncertainty which drove the survey. And our findings were that nearly 850 mother tongues are still alive and present in India today. In one sense, this outcome was very much expected. We were aware that many languages have been lost and many have survived but knowing something and witnessing it are two very different experiences.

You know, to actually travel across the country and meet communities, to sit among people and hear them speak in tongues that most of India has never encountered, was a completely different experience. We are all accustomed to hearing only a few dominant languages in our daily lives, but to hear all these distinct and breathing mother tongues in their own landscapes and among their own communities was, I must say, deeply reassuring and astonishing.

It is commonly said that every language carries within it a unique history and a unique knowledge system. So, whenever a language disappears, what exactly is lost and how irreversible is that loss?

Let me first push back a little on the romanticisation of traditions. First, we should know that not everything in the traditional knowledge system was good or great. Communities have always revised and discarded parts of their inherited stock of knowledge, because what existed previously was not always adequate for all the times. One should not always glorify every tradition uncritically. Another thing is, there is a very common and illogical contradiction in our country today: people say that they encourage innovation and then they glorify tradition. But innovation is, by its very

nature, a departure from tradition. One cannot celebrate both without paying mind to the tension that exists between them.

> Having said that, when a language disappears, something genuinely irreplaceable goes away with it. Whatever a community knew about nature, about their local ecology, about the skills of making and mending things, about how they conceptualised the cosmos – all of this is imbued in their language. And when the language goes, that knowledge cannot be exactly reproduced. Parts of it may survive, but never completely.

Try to understand this with an example: if you go to England and speak of *paripaina* – the act of touching an elder's feet as a mark of respect – they will not understand it, which is fine. But on the other hand, if a Punjabi boy or girl grows up without knowing what it means, they lose something far more significant than a word. They will lose the very architecture of how relationships between the young and the old were understood and lived in that society.

In my opinion, it is not that every language holds an enormous stock of knowledge, but every language holds some sort of unique knowledge that exists nowhere else. And that is precisely what makes its loss irreversible and requires pressing attention.

In contemporary times, linguistic preservation efforts are mainly focused on documentation. What according to you are some untapped and better ways for genuine linguistic preservation ?

Usually, we think of language preservation almost entirely in terms of speaking, as I previously mentioned, and something which is no doubt very important, but we forget the other half of the equation entirely. Among the many instruments of language, the mouth is the most obvious one.

But there is another set of organs we rarely think about: the eardrum, and what lies connected to it deep inside the brain – the Broca area – where the actual making and interpreting of language happens. The neurons in that region interpret the world through the sounds we hear. The eardrum absorbs those sounds, and the brain gives them meaning. Preservation of language cannot be achieved by thinking only about how we speak. We must also think seriously about how we listen.

Yet, I have not come across a single book or course on how to *listen* to Urdu or Persian or any other language. Consider the recitation of the Holy Quran. When words like *Islam*, *Iman* and *Husn* are recited, they carry with them a specific Arabic tonality – a music, almost – that is inseparable from their meaning. It is the ear that captures this. It is the ear that understands. But today, most people encounter languages visually – on screens, in text messages – and rarely orally. And that strips away an enormous amount of a language's semantic substance, its depth of meaning. This is highly evident today.

> Most people today are no longer capable of speaking their language with grace – because graceful language has gone out of fashion. People now use functional language. For example: we say "Hi" where we once said "How do you do?". We say "Hey, come and sit down" where Urdu would offer "Aaiye, tashreef rakhiye" – an invitation that carries within it an entire culture of hospitality and regard. This is not a question of social class or elitism. It is about our diminishing capacity to listen to the subtleties and tonalities of a language. True language conservation, therefore, requires not just reading and documentation – it requires training people to listen. To really listen.

The National Education Policy, 2020 pushes for mother tongue instruction in early schooling, but its implementation remains deeply contested. UNESCO advocates a fully multilingual education system. Where do you stand and what sweet spot does India actually need?

It is well known that teaching a child in their mother tongue significantly adds to their cognitive development – no debate about it. But here is something worth examining. If you look at the countries that have produced the highest number of Nobel Prize winners like the United States, the United Kingfom, Germany, they are all predominantly monolingual societies, or at least conduct their education in a single dominant language. So multilingualism, by itself, does not appear to be the decisive factor in cognitive or intellectual achievement.

There is something else that multilingualism does, something which is equally important, perhaps more urgent for a country like India. It teaches people to be tolerant. You think of the countries that have been the greatest sources of war and conflict in modern history, and then think of the countries that have been multilingual. You will find a striking pattern: multilingual societies tend to be more tolerant, more accommodating of difference, less prone to the kind of majoritarian aggression that produces conflict.

Also read: One Nation, Many Tongues: India's Unfinished Language Debate

I believe that the two serve entirely different purposes and India needs both. Mother tongue education is essential for the development of a child's cognitive abilities – their capacity to think, reason and learn deeply. Multilingual education, on the other hand, is essential for the development of social skills in a complex, diverse society – for teaching people to live alongside those who are different from them

India, therefore, needs a strong primary language for primary schooling, and it needs many languages in its educational system for the sake of social harmony.

In your opinion, how does the linguistic loss you have spoken about represent India as a nation?

I don't think it creates a very positive picture. Because it gives out the impression that we are not fully respecting the diversity we have. If we truly respect our diversity then we would do anything to preserve it and not let it decline in the first place.

It also gives the impression that we, Indian citizens, don't question much. For example, when languages like Hindi and English are continuing to grow and expand, why aren't the other regional languages also growing in their respective areas? These are questions we all must ask our institutions.

Therefore, to keep our cultural image strong across the world, we must preserve our multilingualism. Every language will take away with it the cultural diversity it carries with itself, so we must take steps to sustain our linguistic plurality.

After decades of advocating and fighting for India's languages, what is the one thing you would do or change in modern India's linguistic ecosystem?

If I had it in my hands, I would create a small institution for children, where I could train them to learn the names of trees, plants and herbs in their mother tongue. Most children today cannot name the plants growing outside their own homes. They have been completely severed from the natural world around them. We should keep in mind that a language thrives only when nature thrives. If children can no longer name the world around them in their mother tongue, they are already losing their language.

As far as working with the institution goes, I must add that I have never had much faith in institutions as such. Everything I have done in my life, I have done with people, not through institutions. And I believe that is the deeper truth about language preservation as well. We must never think of language in isolation from the people who speak it. Preserve the people, their dignity, their communities, their connection to the land, and the language will preserve itself.

Rohan Qurashi is a researcher at St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi.

This article went live on February fourteenth, two thousand twenty six, at three minutes past one in the afternoon.