Book Review:

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The institutional location of the expert is cautiously hidden in between the demarcation lines that differentiate “the rest” from the centralised dissemination valve that decides the co-ordinates of cordial power play in the modern times.

The horizontal hierarchy apparently conceals its dysfunctionalism by denying its own existence, to begin with. The simplest way to put complex systems into context is by contextualizing the same in terms of literature; and that done with the help of Marquez’s ‘I Only Came Here to Use the Phone’ is highly innovative and something not a lot of neo-liberal theorists would probably be too fond of!

‘Language Matters’ is a book that reminds us how more often than not, ‘people’ tend to consolidate a language rather than just using one. In that sense, ‘people’ are a language encompassing the language that they use for particular kinds of exchanges.

There are other intriguing notions that the book quite bluntly introduces us to such as the fact that Chomsky went on writing to the Bureau of Internal Revenue about not paying taxes to the American government as a response to its decision to ensue the Vietnam War despite possessing the knowledge that it would probably never be read is an example that suggests that it is not too rare to find a situation wherein the individual need not engage in conversation with a second individual to communicate, or as a matter of fact, engage in any form of exchange. W.B. Yeats’ conceptualisation of a dialogue between the self and the soul is in fact as real a form of ‘exchange’ as it could get.

Although a few legitimate points have been made regarding the absence of proper reference with the help of which the paradigm shift in the context of an egalitarian continuum can be made even theoretically, the fact that hierarchies are not always vertically stratified is inevitable. It would be a pleasure to mention a part of an exchange I had had with Prof. Bishnupriya Dutt a while ago before I had come across the book. She had asked me if the transcendental journey towards the prevalence of hybrid languages is a good or a bad thing. The common minimum that could be traced out was that although such changes often occur without the conscious realization of an individual, ‘the individual’ – placed in a locus that is multi-dimensional and largely global is a part of an inherently collective consolidation. This in itself as a chronology of events is linked to unorganised changes in the linguistic orientation. As an example, take into account the loss of language of music. Speaking of the contemporary music industry, it is now dominated by a market that is far more concerned with beats
and rhythm, often dissociated from the discourse of human language consisting of the verbal-auditory channel altogether.

The opportunity cost of the loss of cultural, social and political resource under such circumstances is so vast that it is not even quantifiable. Now, step down and think about a more pragmatic problem such as the dominance of English as a language. Adaptability that is associated with the language that has become a tool under the heavy influence of the multiple billion dollar market controlling the media and publishing houses (and vice versa), the discourse of knowledge being codified, and codes being sold propagating and establishing a massive power game is derivable. After all, who would deny knowledge is power?

What is obviously beautiful about the book is its technique of citing examples that are both genuine and innovative. It also makes ample visits to various genres of literature – beginning from Marquez right up to the dormant ghost stories hidden at the heart of Odia folklore that instantaneously elevate the spirit.

It also does quite an impressive job on the language that it has taken up. The dive that you take into the lake soon becomes a joyride that is still relatively tranquil and yet highly insightful as a journey. People who feel an affinity with the common basis of the use of language associated with public intellectualism would definitely enjoy reading the book.

However, the conceptualisation and depiction of motion and of imagery could have had a little more to offer, delving into methods of reaching the human mind that runs deeper than the concept of the brain cells. Whereas there is ample discussion and an ample number of metaphors associated with, say, the game of football, or footballers on that note – the number of people who take an interest in language politics or sociolinguistics and yet do not want to take an interest in a game of football is perhaps not meagre.

The socio-cultural references suggested and the kind of introspection that ‘spaces’ in generic terms have been subject to introspection, not succumbing to nomenclature of a particularly defined kind is indeed a praiseworthily bright aspect of the book. However, even Chomsky himself, as I understand from the last conversation that we had had over e-mail last month have had to deal with a “paradigm shift” in context of something as lucidly humane as fervour. He himself is somewhat more concerned about finding an alternative method of expression that stretches beyond the academic discourses within the defined categories of arts and humanities and is somewhat more inclined to surpassing traditional, institutional academic practice. (And for those of us who were perplexed if he himself accepts him for a linguist or not, as a matter of fact, he does!)

This is suggestive of what the book has insinuated several times – the channelization of power and hierarchy is cruder, more brutal and more unjust than ever. If then, there is an initiation point that opens up the possibility of such dynamic purposes of being through our eyes and attempts to pursue more than its own existence as written, printed academic material, ‘Language Matters’ could set an example.

The jump that it takes across continuums makes time indeed look more fluid and somewhat revisitable, something that the sheer power of very intense kind of literature is generally known to be capable of. The simplicity of its method of ensuing conversation with the reader quite directly and slowly but gradually letting him observe the several possibilities and ideas not too optimistically but nevertheless seldom pessimistically makes the book worth a read to language enthusiasts irrespective of their age groups.