

**INTERVIEW with Professor Mohinder. P. Sachdeva**  
**Professor, Department of Anthropology**  
**University of Delhi**



Prof. M.P Sachdeva has received his training in anthropology from Panjab University, Chandigarh where he was awarded the Panjab University Gold Medal and Bureau of Police Research and Development, Ministry of Home Affairs Fellowship to pursue his doctoral research. He specializes in Human population genetics, Molecular genetics and Forensic anthropology and has been teaching papers on Population genetics, Forensic anthropology, Serology, Palaeoanthropology, Biochemical genetics, Human biological diversity, Ethnic and cultural diversity since 1986 to both undergraduate and post graduate students. He has completed and is pursuing several research projects in Population genetics and molecular anthropology, funded by DBT, DST and UGC. He is a member of many academic bodies and in editorial board of national and international journals.


His interview with the students is as follows :

**Student:** Sir, you have been in the profession for so long now, having taught so many batches. What was your graduation like back at that time and what contrast do you see in today's generation?

**M.P.Sachdeva:** The generation gap will always be there in varying degrees. Our graduation life was much simpler. The differences were not only in terms of the syllabus and infrastructure facilities but also to obtain resource materials, accessibility and affordability. My hostel lunch used to cost one rupee and thirty paise per meal and getting one page photostatted needed one rupee. There were no computers, no internet and no Googling! We used to spend long hours in libraries and now the students rarely visit them. There is a flood of information, on every sphere of life, easily available on computers, tablets and mobile phones. This has, in my opinion, led to lack of sincerity both in teachers and students.

**Student:** Sir, could you please tell us about your journey from being a student to being a professor?

**M.P.Sachdeva:** It was not an easy journey. I was born and got my early education in a small village in Punjab. Punjabi was the medium of instructions. English teaching started only in the sixth class. After matriculation, the college life was only for two years at DAV College, Malout. There was no 10 + 2 system at that time and we had pre-university and pre-medical classes for those who wanted to opt for biological sciences or become a doctor. There was no B.Sc. facilities in my college at that time. But I wanted to be a doctor! I could not get admission in M.B.B.S as the admission was only on the basis of merit. There was no PMT. Even after passing the 12th class I did not know that there was something like a university with teaching departments. I thought university was only a huge building where our results were compiled and declared. After much meandering and collection of half-baked information I somehow met a long-lost friend, who was a research scholar in zoology, of my elder brother at Panjab University, Chandigarh. The first thing he asked me was that in which course I had applied. He was flabbergasted to learn that I did not apply for any B.Sc. course. The admission process was almost over. As he was a leader-type student, he took me to



Head of the zoology department for my admission in B.Sc. (Honours School) course. Very reluctantly the great soul permitted my admission on the condition that it would be cancelled if the candidates in the waiting list came to join. When I was standing in the queue to deposit the admission fees a messenger from the department came to shock me that my admission was cancelled as both the waiting candidates had come to seek admission. I started crying loudly as a five year old child does. After coming from a small village, Chandigarh for me was nothing less than New York and I did not want to go back. My brother's friend then asked me whether I would be interested in Anthropology. And that was the word I had heard for the first time!

I said "yes" in one millionth of a second without even asking about the subject of anthropology. To my luck, there was no waiting list there. Not many people were keen to join Anthropology at that time. Then there was no looking back. I started to like the subject as it deals with the "Study of Man"! As per my standards I excelled, got university medals, got degrees from the then Vice President of India and had the honor of having dinner with him along with other 'toppers'. In my M.Sc. I somehow came to learn about Criminal investigation and the role of Forensic Anthropology. I was one of the twelve candidates in India, from seven different disciplines, to be awarded the Bureau of Police Research & Development, Govt. of India, fellowship to do research for Ph.D degree. As my co-supervisor was at the Institute of Criminology & Forensic Science, Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India, New Delhi I completed my laboratory work there. During my nearly two years' stay at Delhi I had not seen University of Delhi though as a matter of routine I had applied for two positions of lecturers in the department of Anthropology there. When the interview call came two years later, I was extremely reluctant to appear for the same as I lacked confidence, 'good' clothes, and money to

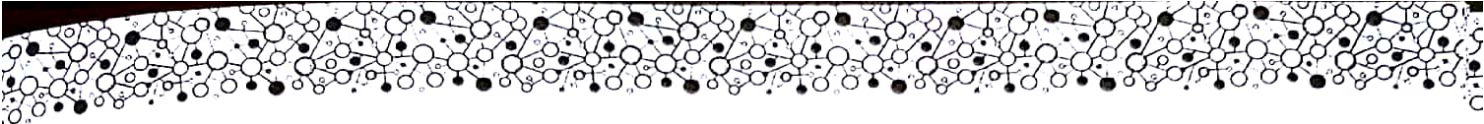
travel to Delhi from Chandigarh. My doctor-father, virtually compelled me to go to University of Delhi. To my great surprise and luck, I was selected. I joined the University of Delhi as a lecturer in May 1986, became a Reader, as others also somehow become, and was selected as Professor in 2004. Teaching and research is the routine thing for a university teacher. In addition, I have completed major research projects from, UGC, DBT, DST, etc. Besides M.Phil students, I have guided more than twenty Ph.D students and eight are pursuing their Ph.D course under my supervision.

**Student:** What do you think is the role of teachers in today's education system?

**M.P. Sachdeva:** The class room teacher's role will never diminish. In spite of all the information available on internet, YouTube and ready-made video classes, there is no substitute to a regular interactive class room teaching. A teacher's role is to make the basics crystal clear and supplementation and add-ons could be there later. A teacher also can serve as a true "friend, philosopher and guide". Teachers also help shape the personality, impart moral values, get the feedback and answer the tangent questions and sometimes totally unrelated queries and doubts. In class room settings a teacher could be a counsellor and a vehicle for the conflict resolution. A student may also learn to unlearn many things, as also how to behave and value of coexistence.

**Student:** Often schools in India are underestimated at providing good scientific approach. Do you think the same and what reforms would you suggest?

**M.P.Sachdeva:** To some extent it is true. The science books at the school level are just full of topics. They do not mention about why we should study a particular subject. What are the application areas where the knowledge gained can be applied? The



practical classes are few and there is more incentive on learning by rote. Each science book should have an introductory chapter and a chapter on the application areas of the topics covered in the book.

**Student:** Sir, what are your views on the role of science and technology in the development of languages?

**M.P.Sachdeva:** Science and technology is turning out to be of immense help not as such in the development of a language but in understanding the descriptive linguistics, coding and encoding, structure and evolution of a language. With the help of technological advances we are now able to preserve the phonetics, and script of a vanishing language. Science and technology is also facilitating in language training and enhancing the communication skills. We should also make efforts to promote and disseminate scientific knowledge in our mother tongue. Russia, China, Israel, Japan and South Korea are the shining examples.

**Student:** How is the growth of languages and their diversification over time is seen in the light of anthropology?

**M.P.Sachdeva:** Language has been shown to play a crucial role in the classification of expressions, identification of people, things, ideas and emotions. Evolution of a language is not separate from the human evolution. Languages are the vehicles for coded culture. When people move and migrate they move with their languages. Then their languages are subject to the same Darwinian selection and the principles of gene flow. There are admixtures and mutual gain of borrowed words. Languages not only bind us on ethnic and regional basis but also divide us on the same lines. A particular language is historically also tied to a type of culture; the breakup of USSR and countries like Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia are glaring examples. As in organic evolution, we have


phylogenetic trees of flora and fauna we have the families of languages. They also have their roots, stem and branches.

**Student:** For a Country like India that has such a great cultural diversity, what are your views on linguistic diversity?

**M.P.Sachdeva:** Linguistic diversity in India is very evident and conspicuous. In India we have hundreds of dialects and languages though only a few have their own script. There are two schools of thought on the peopling of India. One view holds that our genetic identity is correlated with the geography or region and the other believes that it is correlated with the language. Though a majority of studies support the latter view. When we find a small population group, for example, Austro-Asiatic speakers surrounded by a large population of Mundari speakers, question immediately arises on their origins. Have they migrated from somewhere else? If so, when? Sometimes they may possess distinct body features and sometimes not because of long admixture. Parsees and Sindhis in India are examples to ponder upon. We all know how various States were formed in India after independence. The state names like Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Punjab are directly reflective of their major languages, though each has its own speakers of various dialects. India is endowed with such a rich surfeit of languages linked to the process of peopling of India since time immemorial that straight answers are difficult to find. We are yet to completely decipher the Indus valley script to the satisfaction of all.

**Students:** Linguistic anthropology is said to have originated as an endeavour to document endangered languages. Is this goal being actively accomplished in the Indian setting?

**M.P.Sachdeva:** Though Linguistic Anthropology is one of the major subfields in



the four-fold division of Anthropology, it is not being taught in any of the anthropology departments in India. Moreover, as no population group likes a language to be imposed upon them, a language or dialect is difficult to preserve until its speakers are willing to do so. During my recent visit to Manipur I discovered that there is a resurgence and deep-rooted interest in preserving and propagating their Meitei script. People of Manipur take pride not only in their language but also have a strong urge to preserve the script. All the 35 languages in Manipur have become endangered. The Council of Tribal Languages and Literature Societies, Manipur is working hard to urge the government agencies to not only preserve but also to promote these languages. We, the anthropologists are equally keen and worried about the situation across India. Many universities and institutes in India are making great efforts in preserving and promoting the native dialects and languages by project fundings, descriptive analyses, creation of dictionaries, compiling the folk lore and their translations and transliterations. Anvita Abbi's Book "Endangered languages of the Andaman Islands", on one of the world's most endangered and ancient linguistic groups is the prominent example.

**Student:** If you could need your students to read one great text before graduation, what would it be ?

**M.P.Sachdeva:** If you permit me I would like to suggest more than one.

- i) Billions and Billions by Carl Sagan
- ii) Grand Design by Stephen Hawking & Leonard Mlodinov
- iii) The Greatest Show on Earth by Richard Dawkins
- iv) Tao of Physics by Fritjof Capra
- v) The Origin of Species by Charles Darwin

**Student:** Research is something not many students are keen about pursuing as a career.

What would you suggest to inculcate interest in the field of research for this generation?

**M.P.Sachdeva:** The fruits of scientific research are often delayed but very sweet. Meaningful research always leads to tremendous personal growth as well as provides a platform for the nations to develop. Ethnic specific, region specific or country specific needs can only be met if we do not blindly follow, replicate and implement the research findings of other countries having different climate, geography or culture.

**Student:** Lastly, can you conclude the interview with a message for the students who want to pursue science as a career?

**M.P.Sachdeva:** Science has potential to change life across the entire nations and societies. We are enjoying the fruits of scientific research and discoveries be it in Public health, space, national security, communication and Information technology, Forensic science, Agriculture, Genetics, genomics, personalized medicines, idea of designer babies, etc. There is a lot more to be done in each and every branch of science. The scope of science is unlimited and inexhaustible. Become a proud student of Science!

Thank you Sir for sparing your valuable time for such an inspiring interview. Thank you very much.

**Interviewed By-**  
**Tamanna Malik and Lakshay Singh**  
**(Editors)**



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