

MIND MATTERS

LANGUAGE OF THE HEART

Sanjay (Budhia; husband) was once invited to speak at the Founder's Day ceremony of La Martiniere for Girls. Coming from a Hindi-medium background, that too in a non-metro city (Tinsukia, Assam), he instantly thought it was a mistake. Sanjay called Ms Hilda Peacock, the then principal, and said, "Ma'am you have sent the invite in my name by mistake." She said, "No, we have done our homework and we know whom we have invited." His opening line during his speech was "Pardon my English, it is not great as yours." He spoke extempore from the heart. Everyone clapped and clapped. Needless to say, it was much appreciated. He realised that language should not stop us from expressing our views. Whatever we say should come from our hearts — language is just a medium of expression. If you are convent-educated, that is an additional feather on your cap, but if you are not, it should not be a hindrance. It should not limit your thought process to the point that you can't speak in public. If you know what you are speaking about, if there is a take-home value in that content, if it is direct

dil se, then people like that. Many of our top Indian industry icons — Brijmohan Lall Munjal, Dhirubhai Ambani and many, many more who made India proud are from Hindi backgrounds. There should be truth in the content. There should be truth in what we say. There should be truth in what we speak. There should be truth in our conversation. I, too, am from a Hindi background and from Tinsukia, Assam. When I got married and came to Calcutta, I was not fluent in English. My sisters-in-law were very apprehensive about my pronunciation of "sh", which I pronounced as "s", 'fashion' as 'fasion'. I started making conversation with strangers in English. It was important for me to be fluent in that language to fit in. I had to survive in this society. But to express and speak in English on a public platform without notes was a task. I realised very late that this is a hard pass. My speeches were always artificial, written in English by someone else. What I used to speak I could never relate with. It was as if there were two persons. I was literally reading it. Public speaking used to horrify me. That is why I never conducted workshops alone either — always with fellow mental health professionals. It was difficult for me to speak without notes, so I used to prefer speeches over notes. I always used to keep my speech short and whenever I went on stage, I was in a great hurry to finish. I never felt like myself and



Minu Budhia speaking at the launch of her book *Death of a Caterpillar*.

It makes sense to speak in the language that you are comfortable in to get your message across rather than read out a speech that is not from the heart, says Minu Budhia

I could never relate to the content because it was never what I wanted to actually say. Someone would always write the speech for me. Even my life story — someone wrote it for me and I could not relate to it because it was not in my words. At ICanFlyy's concerts, I was always the emcee. When I spoke the English parts, some colleagues would say that it sounded like I was just reading it out. However, there were always a few points in Hindi which I always spoke well, but I still did not realise that I was more comfortable in Hindi — I was probably too immature or did not have enough guts. I would rehearse my speeches several times so that the words would not seem strange or difficult to read, so that while delivering the speech I would not feel it was something ajeeb. But I never stopped. Why? Because if I didn't speak, how would I spread awareness? There is so much stigma around mental health. I was and am on a mission to make mental health an everyday conversation. How will I create awareness about my brand Caring Minds? How will people know that Caring Minds exists? This mission drove me to speak and speak and speak. I never spoke for name and fame — it was for mental health awareness, for

Caring Minds. I have a reasonably good knowledge of mental health, so I always found interactions easier. Question-and-answer formats and fireside chats became my preferred way of public speaking — and I was quite successful at that. Any interview that was in Hindi, any interaction that was in Hindi and any question-answer session in Hindi after a speech was always so easy for me and I used to enjoy it. The questions and answers I used to enjoy because the answers were mine, it was from my knowledge and not written by someone else. When I answered someone, it was from my own knowledge bank. If now I look back at my TEDx speech, it would be very different if given a chance to speak again. No regrets, all these experiences led me to where I am today. Otherwise, I would not have achieved this.

MY AHA! MOMENT

When we decided to launch my memoir (*Death of a Caterpillar*), that moment I decided my speech will be in Hindi, a language I am comfortable with, that too direct dil se. That very moment mein azad ho gayi. I started working on my speech. Initially, I took a little help in

writing but later it was all from my heart, all that I wanted to convey. When D-day came, I was working on my speech till the morning of the launch. There were so many emotions that I wanted to express. At the event, I had a powerful, humble emcee, my rock, Sanjay. He invited me to speak. I was nervous but not unsure. I started speaking with a Strepasil in my mouth to ease the dryness. I had kept the speech in front of me just as a back-up — to give myself confidence — but for the first time in my life I spoke for 20 minutes extempore. That was my day. A crowd of 700+ people. No place to sit. People were standing at the back. People had come to listen to me. They clapped and clapped at every three-four-minute intervals. I had to pause several times. Every word was direct from my journey — from my heart, my soul. I paid gratitude to the people who were always there for me. I could express my emotions to the fullest and in the best way because it was in a language which was a part of me. That was the first day of many new beginnings — my new Aha! moment. Sanjay and I were flooded with compliments. People were asking for the video recording of the speech to share

with their friends and families. This girl Prachi, my younger daughter, has opened so many avenues for me in life! Never did I realise that this decision of speaking in Hindi will open so many new chapters in my life. Public speaking used to be a nightmare for me. Slowly, I started enjoying speaking without notes. When I started getting appreciation for my extempore speeches, I realised "Oh! I did it." New Aha! moments.

NEVER LOOKING BACK

After this, I never looked back. I was always good in Hindi and Sanskrit and could express myself well — I was true to the content. I am firmly rooted to the ground due to a joint family background and the struggles through life. I must thank Sanjay here. I was a topper but also his student. Sanjay's notes were the most sought-after in Tinsukia among students. I too studied from his notes. So, we were always very desi, and we are proud of this. I must mention here that Sanjay even translated and published our Sanskrit textbook into Hindi, which also became mandatory along with the original. It was his first entrepreneurial venture and the stepping stone to my journey of writing my memoir. English is not our mother tongue. So we can't be perfect and our pronunciation should not be expected to be perfect. In our country, we are very obsessed with English. Everything is measured here in terms of your English speaking skills. In Paris and Germany, they are not bothered about speaking English. They speak in either French, German or their native language. Even when I was watching Miss Universe years back, I was surprised to see that she used a translator to understand and answer questions. She spoke in her own language confidently. The language barrier did not hold her back. So why judge ourselves for not knowing perfect English? Also, why go that far? Where I live, in Bengal, in Calcutta, what I love about Bengalis is the love for their mother tongue. Bengalis speak in Bengali everywhere. They will always speak in Bengali wherever they are — in and out of the country. They are not bothered about what the people around them think. And they very well manage to get their content heard — I really love it. So, I will end with something in Hindi: Kyunki emotions aatein nahi angrezi mein — Dil ki baatein hoti hein sirf apni zubaan mein!

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, and founder of Caring Minds, ICanFlyy, Cafe ICanFlyy, and a TEDx speaker