

AIIS Statement

The American Institute of Indian Studies was founded sixty years ago to further the knowledge of India in the United States by supporting American scholarship on India. The programs of AIIS foster the production of and engagement with scholarship on India, and promote and advance mutual understanding between the citizens of the United States and of India. AIIS seeks to provide access to scholarship about India to a wide and diverse audience.

Welcome

Anandi: Welcome to the July 2022 episode of the American Institute of Indian Studies special 60th anniversary podcast series. My name is Anandi Silva Knuppel and I am the Strategic Initiatives and Projects Specialist for AIIS. Through this series of conversations we will explore and celebrate the oral history of AIIS over the last 60 years including the founding of the institute, its impact on scholarship and students, and its future.

In this episode of our 60th anniversary series, Dr. A. N. Singh, AIIS Hindi program head interviews Dr. Rakesh Ranjan, Senior Lecturer and Language Coordinator at Columbia University and former AIIS Hindi Language Program Director and current AIIS Language Committee member. In their interview, they discuss the early days of the Hindi language program at AIIS and its growth, the unique format and characteristics of the AIIS language programs, and current challenges and future directions of Hindi language learning. I personally am excited and grateful to hear their conversation as a former AIIS Hindi language student!

A note to our listeners - the following interview is in Hindi. For those who would prefer an English transcript, you can download a pdf translation of this episode on our website, www.indiastudies.org.

Rakesh Ji – Namaskar, Swami Ji!

Swami Ji – Namaskar, Rakesh Ji!

Rakesh Ji – How are you?

Swami Ji – I am fine. How are you?

Rakesh Ji – I am fine, too! Thanks! Our today's conversation is about the AIIS@60 conversation series, and we will talk about the Hindi language program. So, my question is that you've been associated with the Hindi language program for a long period of time. When did you arrive in this program? And after you joined, you've seen its expansion and development, so please tell us about it.

Swami Ji – Sure, I joined the AIIS Hindi language program in 1989. The Hindi language program was located in Banaras at that time, and when I joined, there were only three students in the Hindi language year-long program. So, it was a very small program and there were only one and a half teachers. I mean one full-time and one part-time – one and a half teachers and three students. I have been associated with the program since then. But I have seen a lot of ups and downs during this period and I have worked with some senior officials. Six of them were AIIS presidents, six were language chairpersons, two were director generals and two were language program leads. I was fortunate to work with them.

Rakesh Ji – Namaskar! Very good. So this was a program of three graduate students and today the situation has completely changed. When did this change begin? You mentioned that this program was situated in Banaras and then to Udaipur. Was there any specific reason for the change in location, or was this done just for a change?

Swami Ji – Of course when there were only three students, it was a year-long program. Only graduate students used to come. However, when the summer program started in 1990, then undergraduate students also started coming. That was the beginning and the program is still going on. The number kept increasing. Earlier it was only an advanced program. And then the intermediate and now we have the beginner program, too. That's why the number of students has increased. Yes, regarding the question of the location change, this program was located in Banaras until 1998. I mean, it was in Banaras before I joined.

The program was in Banaras from 1986 to 1998 in Banaras. It was relocated in Udaipur in 1999. The reason was the massive power cuts in Banaras. It caused many problems during the summer program. Back then, Ganga Safai (Clean Ganga) campaign was going on. Because of that campaign, the old sewers and drains were diverted and blocked, and that caused flooding on the streets during the monsoon. Dirty water flowed on the streets, which caused many diseases. These were the two main reasons for the decision to change the location, and the program went to Udaipur in 1999.

Rakesh Ji – So, how is the program going in Udaipur? Was this a good decision for the program? **Swami Ji** – Udaipur...good question. The decision was good. But it didn't succeed all that much. There are other reasons. Udaipur is a bit remote in a way. The city was cut off from many things. There were three ways to get there. Road, rail, and flight. It is very difficult to travel via road. It takes a lot of time. By train, from Delhi to

Udaipur, there is only a single meter gauge train and it was not even a broad gauge. Back then it took 36 hours to get to Udaipur from Delhi, which was a problem. It was difficult for the students to another city. The other thing was that Udaipur is a small city. The population was 4 lacs to 3.5 when the program moved there. There were not many activities, especially academic activities there. Students used to miss these activities. For this reason, it was decided to move. After three years, it was shifted to Jaipur in 2002. It has been here since then.

Rakesh Ji – So, everything is going fine in Jaipur? There should be an academic atmosphere, and

a cultural atmosphere – and are you satisfied with it?

Swami Ji – I cannot say I am completely satisfied, because one requires many things for language instruction and it is hard to find everything in one place. Banaras was an ideal place for the language, but it was not good for health. The atmosphere was not good. It was hot, and no electricity. So, it is also important to be alive to learn a language. Jaipur has many things; there are many activities and academic activities. But there isn't any street life or community atmosphere. For example, in Banaras, people sit on ghats to chat casually in the local language on local issues. Jaipur does not have this. The life here is ordinary, you can say – behind closed doors. Not on the streets. Banaras life is on the streets, which is considered ideal.

Rakesh Ji – Very good. I agree with you. You said when you came the number of students was three.

Swami Ji – Yes.

Rakesh Ji – And this is your 34th year? Which was the biggest program?

Swami Ji – Very good question. Whether the program is big or small, I mean you need many things for the development of the program. Like a solid — what do you call it? The administrative direction from the top. This is not only the job of the teachers. The development is not in their hands. Instead, support is expected from the officials at the top. And, we got that support. I would say that it was our previous Director-General, Dr. Pradeep Rai Mehendiratta Ji. He passed away a few months ago. May his soul rest in peace! We got his full support. His support made us feel at home- like a congenial family atmosphere, where everyone wanted to work, and everyone felt like a family. This development happened because of his guidance.

As I said, there were only three students when I first came, and by the year 2011-2012, there were 119 students, which is still a record. 119 students in one academic year including the summer program. In 1989, there was only one program – an advanced Hindi language academic program. By the year 2012, there were nine different

programs. In which, there were 8-month long academic programs, semester programs, summer programs, and a small one to six-week-long programs. Including all these, there was a lot of new developments. All the credit goes to Mehendiratta Ji.

Rakesh Ji – Excellent, excellent! He was a visionary. He is also my ideal. He provided many new directions. And, we have our Purnima Ji...she is maintaining the same kind of responsibility. She is also very supportive.

Swami Ji – Of course. I get full support from her and we will keep on getting the same. And, look, people say that I have spent my entire life at one place. I say that I get everything here.

Rakesh Ji- I was going to ask that you have been with one program for 34 years. What is the secret if you have not looked for a new job?

Swami Ji – As I said, I get a family atmosphere here. It does not feel like I am doing a job. I feel like I am a part of the family. I am helping the family grow (and) develop. As I said, the top officials, Mehendiratta Ji, Purnima Ji, and some chairpersons in the initial stage – have also helped. That is why I did not feel the need to go somewhere else. And, the biggest thing – job satisfaction. I was happy with my work, satisfied. That is why there was no need for another job.

Rakesh Ji – So, you were happy with your work. You got the support of your coworkers and colleagues. This is very good. So, I am trying to ask why are the students so happy to participate in this program?

Swami Ji – Look, this is a policy of our program. You can say this is a rule, a mission of our program. Our focus is on the learner and learning, and not just the teaching, which means that whatever our students want, I am not saying a hundred percent, but their language-related wishes are almost fulfilled. That is why they are happy. They do what they want. Whatever their needs are, they are taken care of. It is not that we have a fixed prescribed course and we impose on them. We change our strategy and program according to their needs. We keep changing the syllabi. Perhaps, this is why the students are happy.

Rakesh Ji – So, this is a very good point that you have said. I also agree with this. I also consider myself a part of the AIIIS Hindi program, so this is really important that we make pedagogical preparations before the students arrive. And, another thing I want to share is that AIIIS emphasizes group education. Just one teacher does not teach everything, and it requires a lot of preparation. So, would you like to tell us how you prepare? Whether it is one student or there are ten students. Whether they are all at the same level or at different stages. And you said there are 9 different kinds. So, this is a minuscule difference. However, from the pedagogical point of view, it is very important

that in order to succeed, students should get what they want from the program. So, what do you do for to achieve this goal?

Swami Ji – As far as language instruction is concerned, we do two kinds of preparation. First, we look at the statement of purpose in the students' applications. They write about why they want to learn the language, what are they going to do with it, etc. Some of them want to work in specific fields – history, music – they come with such desires. So, before they come here, we design the course material keeping their needs in mind. Their development will happen according to the material we will provide them. As we work with them, we figure out slowly what their interests are and then our teachers work in groups to deliver them the materials they need. This is a group effort, not done by a single person. This is impossible if not done in a group. This is the success of the whole group. Credit goes to the entire group.

Rakesh Ji – Ok. Along with this, technology also plays an important role in education, especially important for American students. So, do you think that the technology should be used in the Hindi language program, which can help the students? Do you keep updating things related to technology?

Swami Ji – Of course, of course. This means that update keeps happening. In the beginning, in the nineties, all the educational material we had was in the hard copy. We typed and printed everything and kept it in folders. But 99.9% of materials were in soft copies. Now everything is digitized. This is one big change for us, number 1. Number 2, it helps us save time, and we can exchange educational material with a lot of ease. And we can get their ideas and opinions, this is the very useful thing about technology. But on the other hand, there are both things about teaching and learning a language. The good thing is that we can prepare the materials - we give and take, it's a good thing. But the bad thing is, as it is said, why do American students come to India? It is so hot here and there are so many diseases, and America has so many facilities; two teachers can go and teach there. However, the students come here because it is an immersion program; we have a direct language community. They get to meet and socialize and be able to talk (but) students need free time. They have to go out. They will have to talk to people. But because of the technology, there is no personal interaction.-could be my personal experience, I have noticed that most of the students are busy with their phones and laptops and because of this the language skill of the target language weakens, or it doesn't develop that much. This is a bad thing.

Rakesh Ji – Yes, this is also a problem in America. We feel it too. You mentioned the immersion program. And, this is true. Language lives in the society, it flourishes in the society, and this is a big part of education. How do you include these things in your curriculum?

Swami Ji – Yes, very good question. See, in our weekly program, we include a variety of things and activities in the schedule. The Hindi language is not of one type, it is of many varieties. There are many things in it. In one schedule, in one week there are 20 hours, and 20 classes, and we provide different kinds of classes so that they can be exposed to different aspects of languages. There are a few things like community projects and field trips. People want to do their personal projects, and they have to go into the community and talk to the local community. So, you call it a course, or the requirement for the course. Whatever you call it, we fulfill these things like this.

Rakesh Ji – So, you talked about the varieties of the Hindi language, and I know you also invite guests.

Swami Ji—Yes, yes.

Rakesh Ji – And these guests are from different communities. Students get to listen to their language. What else do you do?

Swami Ji – There is an educational trip on the weekend. We take them to different places. We introduce them to people there. Students talk to them. Then they come back to class and talk about it, write reports, tell us what happened there, etc. So, this is how it's done and then there's a weekly class which is called community project. Students go on their own and meet people and they write reports about it in class. We focus on these two things.

Rakesh Ji – I wanted to ask one more thing. What we teach we think is very good, but quite often students do not think so. They think it is not of any use, or that the teachers are teaching whatever they want. Is there any provision in your program where you continuously ask the students if their needs are being taken care of, and how quickly we can include their suggestions?

Swami Ji – You have asked a good question. There is a big rule in our program. We call it flexibility. We talk every week with the students and take their advice on what class, which subject is going well, and which ones are not doing well. So, we change that according to their suggestions. We can change the material or change the class. Whatever the need is, we keep on adjusting.

Rakesh Ji – Ok, so in any class, not all students are at the same level. Some are more intelligent and some are not. So, we try to help those students with extra classes. And for that, AIIIS has another specialty. During their free time, students can come and ask questions. They can ask for additional help with their homework and get more materials.

Swami Ji – Yes, we have three provisions for this. You are correct that when we have students of different levels and they have different needs; when there are 4-5 students in a group, they can also have different needs. For this, we do three different things. First, in the weekly schedule, we have a class called personal tutorial, “one on one”. One student and one teacher, so that students’ needs can be fulfilled – number one. Number two, there is a zero-hour/office hour every week, and in the American system, a student can come anytime to the teacher and can ask anything language-related questions. Number three, if the student is weak, we have extra classes from time to time, if the student is willing.

Rakesh Ji – Yes, yes. So, have you had any sour and sweet experiences in all these years? Are there any such stories that you will never forget? There must be some nice memories that you would like to remember. Would you share some memories?

Swami Ji – Sure. It is not the time to share sour experiences. but yes, I would like to share a very good memory. As we say, AIIIS's motto is learning language through cultural exposure. I would like to share an example of the good life. It happened to me. It happened after a gap of 15 years. Meaning, that there was a student in 1997 and we met again in 2012 – after 15 years. I will tell you in detail the way it happened. This program was in Banaras at that time. There was a student in the summer program in 1997. You might have been there, too.

Rakesh Ji – Yes.

Swami Ji – I will tell you their name later. At that time, the summer program was of 10 weeks, and now it is of only 8 weeks. For ten weeks he studied with us, he was an advanced level student. After that, what he did, where he went, we had no idea. No contact. In 2012, I met him again, not in India, but in Toronto, Canada. Anyway, as you know, we met for the Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference, We also had the AIIIS annual meeting too. We usually organize both (meetings) together so that all the professors could participate in both. This meeting was in Toronto in 2012.

We went to participate in the AIIIS meeting. At that time, the chairperson for the language committee was Prof. Naseem Hines, although she was there for a very short duration. She was present there. So, two people went from India – Urdu language program head Dr. Ahtesham Ahmad Khan and I. We had to be there at 6-7 in the evening, but our New York to Toronto flight was delayed. Our luggage didn’t arrive by that time. We kept on waiting for a long time and it did not arrive. Then we were told to go to a hotel and that our luggage would be delivered later. So, we went to the hotel and this meant that we had only one pair of clothes in the last two days. No showering and no freshening up – same clothes. A formal AIIIS meeting was about to take place. But there was an informal AIIIS get-together in the evening. So when we reached the hotel,

we had to go to attend the get-together. Prof. Naseem Hines came and said that we had to attend too. So went in the same clothes.

People were gathered there. When we looked around, there were great dignitaries there but we appeared like beggars – no shower, not freshened up, wearing the same clothes for the last two days. But what happened after that is important. When we were avoiding making eye contact with people and feeling embarrassed and thought that we should not be there. We saw a young man walking toward us. When he came close to me, touched my feet, and greeted me. I did not recognize him promptly, but when I recognized him, I was surprised – he was the same student who was there 15 years ago – Christian Lee Novetzke. Why was he there? We found out later that he was the vice president of AIIS. At the time, many trustees were there and many other people were present. And, he touched my feet and greeted me. This was a moment of pride for AIIS, and for me, this was a great example of cultural exposure. What did we teach him, we were together for just 10 weeks. This is a very sweet memory. Perhaps, you were there, too.

Rakesh Ji – I also remember this story of Christian. He had knocked on my door at 4:00 in the morning because back then many people were getting sick in Banaras. He was suffering from food poisoning and he was in a bad shape. He did not know what to do, or where to go, so he came to me. Cell phones were not there at that time. So, he came to me, and then I took him to a doctor. So, this is a very sweet memory.

This question is regarding the program management. Let's talk about the administrative part of the program that you mentioned. Would you talk about it in detail—how do you get these two kinds of support—one from the office in Delhi where you contact the Director-General and another from the chair of the language committee who is responsible for the educational matters. So, how do you coordinate it? What kind of arrangement is this? Is it working well, or do need some kind of improvement? Do you get all the information you need?

Swami Ji – No, this arrangement appears to be a perfect concept. In a program, there are two kinds of things, especially in educational institutions. One is academic-related and one administrative-related. There should be two different wings and there are two different persons responsible. This concept is very good. We have direct contact with the Delhi office, and whatever discussion we do is through the director-general, via the Delhi office. We cannot talk directly to others. Yes, if it is very academic-related then we contact the chairperson.

Rakesh Ji – Yes, I felt this when I was working, Mehendiratta Ji, and now Purnima Ji – they play a very important role. They are at the topmost post of the family and they keep things running smoothly. If our needs don't are fulfilled, it may affect the program. But

such coordination is not very common in the Indian official culture. The AIIS's system is unique, and immediate action is taken here.

Swami Ji – Yes, of course. This is absolutely correct. This tradition has been around since Mehendiratta Ji's time, and it is still around. Sometimes it feels like we get more than our needs, and it often happens and it is a very good thing.

Rakesh Ji – Yes, this is it.

Rakesh Ji – A new age of online teaching has begun recently because of the corona, and earlier it was in-person teaching. When I talk to the old students of AIIS and the ones who have taken classes on Zoom, I feel as though the students do not get to learn on Zoom what they learn while in India. They are all desperate to go to India and want to learn Hindi the same way they did before. But online teaching has opened a new way for language programs. So what do you have to say about this when you're sitting in Jaipur and teaching online. What is the biggest difference when you teach in-person in Jaipur?

Rakesh Ji – A new age of online teaching has begun recently because of the corona, and earlier it was in-person teaching. When I talk to the old students of AIIS and the ones who have taken classes on Zoom, I feel as though the students do not get to learn on Zoom what they learn while in India. They are all desperate to go to India and want to learn Hindi the same way they did before. But online teaching has opened a new way for language programs. So what do you have to say about this when you're sitting in Jaipur and teaching online. What is the biggest difference when you teach in person in Jaipur?

Swami Ji – I have had the opportunity to teach in both kinds of classes. Virtual and in-person. So, my experience is that virtual teaching has a lot of limitations. What is possible in in-person is not possible in virtual teaching. For example, to learn a language you need to practice in a community, it is not done just in the classrooms. Talking with the community, the opportunity to roam around, meaning you need to implement it, whatever you learn you use it. Those opportunities are not there in virtual teaching. Another thing is that it is a part of the pedagogy, what is the layout of the classroom—how many doors, how many windows, how many lights, and that has its effect. It affects teaching and learning. But in virtual, you could be lying in your bedroom, you could be standing on a street, someone can lie in the garden, so that atmosphere cannot be created, so a need for that is felt. The third thing is that language is not just the audible language, there are many things, like body language, gestures, and these things also work, and this can be naturally seen in in-person teaching but not in virtual teaching. We only see the face and are unaware of the body language. So these are the limitations of virtual teaching, but I will say that something is better than not having it at all. This must be our last option, and this should not be done as a preference.

Rakesh Ji – Ok, so what is the future of the Hindi language program from your point of view? And, also about other languages because you're very senior and you all the colleagues, and how is the AIIS pedagogical mission working? Would you say something about this?

Swami Ji – It is said, if everything is good and nothing is needed, this should not happen either. These thoughts should not come that despite having everything complete and perfect, change should keep happening in life. It should keep happening in some form. Whatever new technology we bring, and how we bring it into our program, we should keep thinking about bringing new things into our program. As if we have virtual teaching now so it does not mean that we have to keep doing virtual teaching; we can keep doing both virtual and in-person teaching. This is a new addition to our program. These kinds of changes should keep happening for faculty development, the development of teaching material, and the expansion of the program. We should not think that it is complete in every sense, and we do not need anything, this should not happen.

As far as the future of Hindi is concerned, as long as it is India, Hindi's future will always be bright, but there are many languages in our AIIS that have grown or have seen their downfall. This has been because of the outer forces, because of American reasons, because they focus on the languages they need and ignore the ones they do not need. But if you have to work in India then Hindi will always be required, and Hindi's future will be there. However, we just have to think about how we can develop it more, and in what form.

Rakesh Ji – Thank you very much. Do you want to ask me some questions? Do you?

Swami Ji – I want to know how you were associated with the AIIS program, when did you join it, how did you join it, and how are you associated with it these days?

Rakesh Ji – So, as you know when you were teaching in Banaras, I came at the same time, in 1993 in the month of October, and then I got the chance to teach at AIIS. Mehendiratta Ji said, "Rakesh, that program is very small, only 6 students are there." At that time, I was finishing my Ph.D. at Delhi University. He said let's see if you like it there or not. When I went there, you may remember, in the first class, I went to the institute at 9 o'clock and I sat there from 9 am to 5 pm. I did not go out, and the best thing that I liked was the devotion of the students. There was a power cut that day, everyone was sweating but no one complained. Classes continued, they were not canceled. Everyone was sitting without the fans; there were not any inverters back then. So this kind of devotion I had not seen in my life before. That the students were so devoted and they were still studying, learning, and not complaining. So, this was a big reason for me. Another reason was that the teachers were also devoted, so these two things—devoted students and devoted teachers. It is very hard to find these. I realized it. So, that's why I

joined the program. I was there for five years. As you know, until 1998. Then I to Jaipur, and I was with you there. After that, I went to Emory and now I am at Columbia.

The reason to remain associated (with the Hindi Program) was that the immersion program is not possible here (in the USA), and without the immersion program, the right development of the students was not possible. The right grasp of the language does not happen here. That's why Mehediratta and Purnima Ji and you provide me the opportunity.

I try to be there during the summer programs for two reasons. First, I get to meet all the students who learn Hindi anywhere in America at the AIIS, and I get to learn the good things and the bad things, bad things not in a negative way, by bad things I mean what is missing in the teaching here. I get to think about this and work on its improvement. Students of all levels come there, it's a big program, and I like it that all the teachers live like a family, and I get to see different teaching challenges, and I get to learn every year something new. I prepare my materials and project based on my teaching experience there.

You know that I have developed two-three projects -the Startalk modules project and festivals of India. I invasion what kind of things they need, and how should we make it, and this is my interest in the Hindi Language Program. I also learn from the students-what kind of material they need, what kind of teaching methodology and pedagogical insight they like– I get all that. That is why I am associated, and I will be associated as long as it works.

Swami Ji – And these days you are associated with the AIIS Language Committee as a member.

Rakesh Ji – Yes, yes. So that also gives me an insight. What students are interested in Hindi and in other languages, and what are they? What are the needs, and how can I help AIIS? I am happy whether it is Rebecca Ji or a member of the language committee, we care about the AIIS. When I meet Purnima Ji, we talk about these matters, Purnima Ji cares about these things, and she wants students should get all the facilities, whether academic or non-academic it is important in the immersion program-their living conditions. You may remember that Raju used to cook and served the students that food whether they liked it or not.

Swami Ji – Yes, Yes, Yes. **Rakesh Ji** – When I went there, it was not happening. Students were not served the food of their choice. You may recall this.

Swami Ji – The mess committee's concept has come from you.

Rakesh Ji – Yes, yes. You may know that the students wait for lunchtime, and the way they eat also provides a learning experience. When I was there in the language

program, the teaching was already excellent. All the teachers were committed. There was a lot of teaching material, and then you may remember, I stressed the fact that we should ask the students what kind of things we should include in the teaching. They give their suggestion and then how can their living arrangements be made so that there won't be any distraction. So, this was my idea that there should be a good academic atmosphere and institutional atmosphere and a healthy atmosphere in the city and family where they live.

Swami Ji – Yes, these ideas have a lot of contribution to the success of the program and you started all this.

Rakesh Ji – Thank you very much.

Swami Ji – Thanks to you, too!

Well that's our time for today. A grateful thank you to Dr. A. N. Singh, AIIS Hindi program head and Dr. Rakesh Ranjan, Senior Lecturer and Language Coordinator at Columbia University and former AIIS Hindi Language Program Director and current AIIS Language Committee member.

And thank you for listening.

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