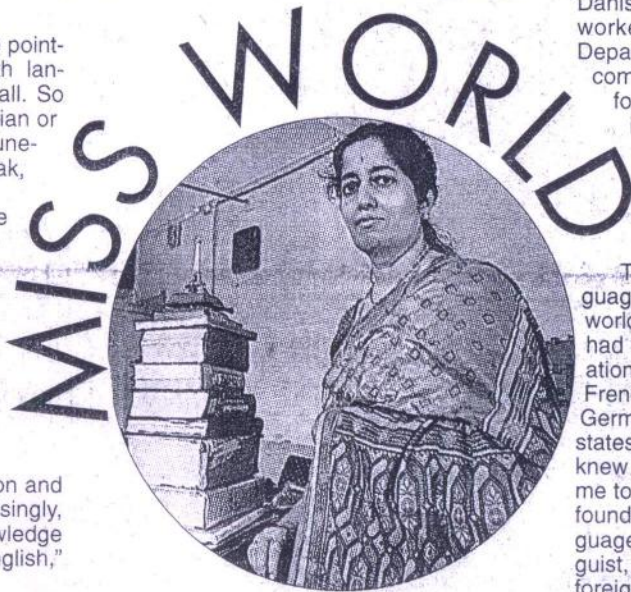


Huned Contractor
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THE many dictionaries are a tell-tale pointer to someone being in love with languages. Not just a few, but 27 in all. So whether it be Bulgarian or Bengali, Persian or Punjabi and Turkish or Tamil, the Pune-based linguist Madhuri Datar can speak, write and read them with equal fluency.

It's no mean feat to be able to translate a technical document from French to Marathi or a corporate executive's speech from English to Russian. For 50-year-old Madhuri it is all-in a day's work at her entrepreneurial venture called the Language Services Bureau, where women are employed with a flexi-time facility to work on computers supported with software that enables processing in 150 languages. "There is a tremendous demand now for translation and interpretation due to globalisation. Surprisingly, 63 per cent of the world's technical knowledge is published in languages other than English," says Madhuri.

Few know, however, that Madhuri is not just a businesswoman with a head for words, whether they be in Pushtu, Swahili, Swedish,



Linguist Madhuri Datar speaks 27 languages, has helped the CID crack cases and is now busy tapping into the language business

Danish or Yugoslav. From 1970 to 1975, she worked with the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in Mumbai, to crack open complicated cases involving foreigners. As for instance, interrogating Charles Sobhraj in French when he was nabbed in the Ashoka Hotel diamond theft case, or convincing a mentally deranged French woman to board her flight without a monkey whom she had adopted as her child.

To think that Madhuri's dexterity with languages was born out of her desire to "see the world." She would have been an air hostess had not her father put his foot down. In retaliation, Madhuri graduated with a degree in French and topped it with a crash course in German. About her stint with the police, she states: "I was employed by the CID because I knew French but then later, they persuaded me to study Arabic. And then it was as if I had found my groove for I kept on studying one language after another. Further, as a multi-linguist, Madhuri found herself hob-nobbing with foreign delegates apart from getting umpteen opportunities to travel abroad. "I have seen most of the world, except Russia," she claims.

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In the mid-70s, though, Madhuri realised that the CID job was getting stagnant. "Then," she elaborates, "I was getting married to a Pune-based medical representative.

Although I did try commuting to Mumbai after marriage, it was too tiring." Her husband Sanjay, who is now a marketing consultant, was not going to let his talented wife slip into the role of a home-maker. Recalls Madhuri: "He took me to meet the visionary industrialist Shantanurao Kirloskar, who was so impressed with my linguistic proficiency that he started a language department in Kirloskar Consultants to process technical docu-

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ments."

But, as she will quickly admit, there was no gain without pain. Not only was there a home front and two growing children to look after, but she was constantly devoured by her inner passion to keep learning new languages. "To do that," she says, "one had to devise many opportunities. For example, persuading a priest from a seminary in Pune to teach me Spanish, picking up Italian from a student who was pursuing his PhD studies in Pune, or striking up a

barter deal with some Greek students who wanted to be able to converse in Marathi."

When Madhuri finally decided to turn entrepreneur, she installed 20 typewriters in her home to carry out the typing of the translated papers, related to professions as wide ranging as taxation, insurance, information technology, medical, engineering or politics.

Now, there are computers and Madhuri does not have to refer to the dictionaries as frequently as before. "In fact,

the business being all set up, it allows me time to plan and execute projects for women empowerment in my capacity as the President of the Pune chapter of the Association of Women Entrepreneurs and Industrialists of Maharashtra (WIMA)," she says.

Meanwhile, her daughter Devaki has already mastered French, while her son Niranjan wants to study travel and tourism.

There is a bit of the wanderlust in all of them. Madhuri will not think twice before taking off to some exotic place where, apart from everything else, she can tune in to a new language. Her ears are always thirsting for more.

huned@indiatimes.com