

Interview

Sudha Rai (SR) talks to Jasbir Jain (JJ)

Jasbir Jain, formerly Professor of English at the University of Rajasthan, where she was also Director, Academic Staff College (1992-1997), UGC Emeritus Fellow (2001-2003) and Sahitya Akademi's Writer in-Residence(2009) is currently the Founder Director of IRIS, Jaipur (Institute for Research in Interdisciplinary Studies). Professor Jain is an elected life member of Clare Hall, Cambridge, U.K. She is the recipient of several awards including the K. K. Birla Foundation Fellowship for Comparative Literature (1997-1999); Lifetime Achievement Award IACS (2004); and the SALA award for distinguished scholarship (2008).

Professor Jain has published extensively in a wide range of areas, especially Indian literature. This includes language literatures, an area where she has published three volumes on the history of the Indian novel from 1860-2002. These are: *Feminizing Political Discourse* (1996), *Contextualising Modernism* (2001) and *Beyond Post Colonialism* (2006). Other thrust areas in which she has made her mark are feminism, drama, culture, theory and narratology. Some of her well-known publications include *Deconstructing Character: Transformations in American Drama* (1997); *Theorising Resistance* (2012); *You Ask, I Tell*—a translation of Hansa Wadkar's autobiography that she co-edited with Shobha Shinde (2013); *The Diaspora Writes Home* (2015); *Forgiveness: Between Memory and History* (2016) and *Bridge Across the Rivers* (2017), co-edited with Tripti Jain. Her latest publication, *Subcontinental Histories: Literary Reflections on the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* is expected to be out by the end of 2017. Her work is widely cited and is evidence of her unrelenting pursuit of intellectual inquiry and exploration of ideas.

SR: Growing up, which languages did you speak in your family? In what way have you enriched your classroom and research through your multilingual inheritance?

JJ: We were an average family knowing or speaking three languages—Punjabi, Hindustani and a little later English, as each one of us grew up. My father knew Urdu well and my brother learnt Persian and did his graduation with Persian as a subject. I learnt Urdu for a couple of months in a municipal school in Mhow in the very first class and studied Latin for one year in a missionary school. Real exposure came to us through my father's frequent transfers to different parts of India and the necessity of picking up a speaking [sic] knowledge of Marathi or Telugu as the case may be and through a very early introduction to books. We were a reading family—all of us. Multilingualism

entered our lives with our marriages into Marwari, Tamil and Malayalam-speaking families. Travel, exposure and reading—all taught us to understand and respect difference. All this has influenced my life and my work.

SR: What are your impressions of your first year as a teacher?

JJ: It was a boys college most of whom came from rural areas. I had to learn to maintain discipline and yet win their confidence, to play along with them in their attempts to get the better of me and yet not yield my ground. I enjoyed it and soon they became my ardent fans and friends. It was enjoyable and fun.

SR: How has your teaching evolved over the years? Can you dwell on some important milestones?

JJ: I think one learns on the way. Pedagogy is situation-bound and depends a great deal on the institution, the classes one is teaching, the feeding schools and also on one's working environment. There are elitist and non-elitist institutions hence there is need to adopt different methods. Finally, pedagogy depends on one's own sense of commitment, imagination and intuition. If you ask me to define pedagogy-it is not limited to a method or a structure-it is commitment plus intuition. It comes from beyond the classroom-the openness of thought processes, a sense of equality, a wee bit of psychological understanding, in fact all that one has learnt and absorbed-and it travels outside the classroom to the cafeteria, library and perhaps playgrounds where a rapport is built. With power-point presentations, clarity is definitely achieved, but an excess leads to repetition, encourages lazy preparation and results in the loss of human touch. Let us not forget that the self-image of the weak students also needs to be boosted, and the differences in their backgrounds of schooling and learning overcome; they are not all on the same level. Their school backgrounds and family upbringing are different in each case. How are you going to make them feel equal?

SR: What were the specific linguistic hurdles and challenges you faced in motivating university students: (a) At the start of your teaching career? (b) In the later years?

JJ: I think I have addressed some of your queries already, but let me add that the medium of schooling is one challenge, gender used to be one too, but with more co-educational schools coming up, it is no longer so. But family backgrounds in terms of class, economic standards, rural or urban backgrounds also do count. The reason why a student has joined a particular course also counts, for it tells us how

serious is the desire to learn. All these differences present a challenge for the teacher and give enough reasons to inspire her to innovate interesting ways of communication. Bilingualism as a teaching strategy is a shortcut except for making an occasional humorous comment. They need to listen to the language as it is spoken, its sounds, rhetoric and rhythm. Lucidity, use of simple words, maximum use of the black or white board, introduction of a couple of synonyms help to encourage the young entrant from a different language medium background into the use of a second language.

SR: What attracted you to teaching as a career/profession? What do you now sum up in terms of its rewards?

JJ: Teaching was my first preference, I liked sharing and discussing; and I think it is important to live with a sense of job satisfaction. I have enjoyed it all. The pinpricks have come from other directions. The rewards have been many. When former students of the early years of my teaching still contact me and my relationships with my former scholars remain on friendly terms, it is abundant reward.

SR: Would you agree that students in Indian classrooms are lacking in rigorous training in their discipline? Why?

JJ: One cannot generalize, there are other factors to be considered: malnutrition, problems at home, low self-image, lack of interest on the part of the teacher, low expectations of the teacher and her failure to motivate interest, casual teaching and inability to relate the material to the outside world. I have noticed a little bit of push encourages them to explore beyond the course; and their participation through presentations, discussions and

occasional participation in the teaching are strong motivating methods. Responsive and critical remarks on their assignments also help to raise levels of motivation. When challenged, they do perform, provided we can keep an excess use of the internet out and instead involve our own selves. In fact, we have a tendency to spread our courses too thin in pursuit of numbers and easy accessibility. There is also a degree of laziness in not assigning self-readings and then assessing the resultant assignments or seminars. Students need to be made self-dependent at the senior level. After all, this very material does well abroad. Good teaching involves spending time on all these extra activities. The national policies, it seems, have long since abandoned the idea of quality despite the whole propaganda around excellence. There is a great deal of talent in our country; we don't allow it enough space to grow by imposing meaningless curbs and our obsession with uniformity of syllabi. True, our problems are many: low education budgets, commercialization, competition, unemployment and now, more than ever before the reluctant teacher and the reluctant student. The worth of the teaching profession has yet to be socially recognized.

SR: You are known for implementing an interdisciplinary approach in your classroom? How does it work?

JJ: I firmly believe that literature is the mother of all disciplines-philosophy, psychology, social sciences and at times art, physics and music. Open a short narrative, take a fairy tale, read a poem-tell me what doesn't come in? What is claustrophobia if not the study of psychology and space? Take the example of Jane Eyre's Red Room or Conrad's sea novels. It is present there; one only has to delve a little deeper. You'll agree with me (I hope), Professor Rai, that one should travel outside the syllabus and the

discipline to make learning both interesting and worthwhile. Despite the limitations of our system where, more often than not, the teacher-student ratio is very uneven a good teacher can strive to create a challenge and sometimes manage to ignite a spark somewhere.

SR: How have you deployed linguistics in your teaching methodology?

JJ: I have not been trained in linguistics but have read widely in the area, especially George Steiner and Ronald Barthes; a wee bit of Chomsky, worked on semiotics (with special reference to drama) and social linguistics while discussing dialogues. Never began with theory but with the text, gradually it seeps in, becomes a game and the interweaving of language, meaning and social background is revealed. Cultural differences, class backgrounds stand revealed. Analyse a dialogue from *Look Back in Anger* or *Omkara*- the inter connections would emerge. Of course, while teaching grammar, structure was definitely a plank. Teaching composition to undergrads and grading the assignments of senior scholars brought this in. When we ask a student to work on narrative patterns, strategies, approaches or dramaturgy for that matter structures surface once again. Interweaving depends on the way one handles teaching. Translation, again is a good medium of opening up structural and syntactical differences. Shakespeare's plays are not only rich in poetry but also rich in rhetoric. Any act of interpretation-whether of fiction or of non-fiction-requires a decoding of meaning, and thus is a linguistic act. Literature is surrounded by theories but is remarkably free from formulas, one has a wide choice.

SR: What would you regard as the high points of your teaching career and the low points and why?

JJ: Low points first: When a good scholar becomes complacent in his or her academic career, it hurts me, I feel frustrated, it's like a plant I have nurtured which has begun to droop, or has surrendered to other pressures.

And the high point. When my own department, the Department of English, University of Rajasthan, invited me to deliver a Memorial Lecture in memory of my own teacher and guide, Professor R. K. Kaul. It was a rare honour and no other memorial lecture I have delivered has meant so much to me. As he was an eighteenth century scholar, I felt a fitting tribute would be to speak on that period.

SR: In what way did you redesign your role as a teacher after you retired formally from the university?

JJ: Thank you for asking this; I founded a Trust on Interdisciplinary Studies-Institute for Research in Interdisciplinary Studies. I established it while still in service in order to create a forum for young scholars, so that they gain confidence, become more articulate, learn to ask and respond to questions, conceptualize and organize their material, research independently. We began with monthly meetings, discussing various critical essays, short stories, philosophy-Kant, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze. We circulated xeroxed material and the discussion was opened by one of the members, to be expanded upon by others. At times, we organized a series of four or five lectures during the summer. We also invited a number of scholars and writers with the support of various organizations and high commissions. It's been a great learning experience and it became a centre for long term friendships. I personally gained a great deal from these discussions. We also included several members in our publication work and thus have trained

them in editing. But the scholars have grown wings and are flying in their own skies. The UGC's new formula for measuring Academic Performance Indicator (API), is a deterrent to good scholarship. Journals are springing up at the rate of a dozen a day and getting recognition from the UGC, and reviews (mostly) are pretending to be research papers; the death knell of any learned pursuit!

SR: In what way did your research feed into your teaching and your teaching into your research?

JJ: My research problems often arose out of my teaching and I also guided research on several periods/authors which were interconnected. The understanding that research brought me enabled me to unravel the texts better, gave me a deep sense of satisfaction and also made the class interaction more interesting. It is not enough to dwell on a fragment of a writer's world, one must extend it beyond that. Not enough to discuss the prelude but also send the student to the library in search of Wordsworth's shorter poems; equally essential for the readers to enter the psychology of the individual fallen angels, as to understand predestination or Christian theology.

SR: Any paper or book that you would like to cite as an outstanding contribution to pedagogy and why?

JJ: That's a difficult question to address. There are several papers on creativity, on pedagogical approaches or aesthetics of education. I have helped design unusual syllabi with a focus on learning skills both for university students and for skill enhancing centres. Once I designed an undergraduate module course-a three tier one of Certificate, Diploma and Degree-in order to

reduce the number of dropouts who were compelled to leave their studies for some reason or the other, but I am afraid no Vice-Chancellor had the time to look at it. We are shy of innovative steps. But I can't really single out anything.

As Director of the Academic Staff College, we streamlined and improved the quality of the orientation and refresher courses, introduced a sense of continuity in the course design, backed it up by [sic] good critical material, encouraged participants' panels and various other methods. My pedagogical experiments have all gone into my teaching and research.

SR: What is the latest research you are involved in?

JJ: There are always times when we debate which road to take. At the moment, a work *Subcontinental Histories: Literary Reflections on the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* is under publication, and my mind is engaged in debating the relative possibilities of two subjects which pose intellectual problems. Too early to talk about the likely winner, but perhaps *Multiple Modernisms* will win. I want to do some work on European thinkers too.

SR: You have received many distinguished awards as a teacher and researcher. What fuels your commitment?

JJ: Most of them have come as surprises, even the *Writer-in-Residence*. The unexpected gives a lot of pleasure, and other fellowships that I worked for, naturally are a matter of satisfaction. They provided me with opportunities to work in good libraries, to interact with scholars of repute, to attend the lectures by philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur and renowned poets like Joseph Brodsky; to meet with playwrights, attend theatre rehearsals and

view a number of performances at Broadway, Off-Broadway and Off Off Broadway. As for your second question, a fire within me and the pleasure of communicating.

SR: Do you think it is important to bring one's personal concerns and ideology into the classroom? Can that shape one's pedagogy too?

JJ: One can compare with real life problems, historical realities, economic facts but the classroom is no place for left-wing or right-wing political ideologies. A liberal secular perspective is the only course in a pluralistic society or for that matter anywhere in the world, else we lead them into bigotry. Jiddu Krishnamurthy is the philosopher of use here with his reliance on an open mind or Levinas's ethics.

The whole purpose of education is to teach them to think, to question and to discern. We are not here as brainwashing agents. As ideology surrounds us on all sides, any discussion that takes place must present all its sides. Personal beliefs in a moral and an ethical code definitely enter relationships and for that matter pedagogy.

SR: What are your own pedagogical strategies to encourage students to rediscover knowledge?

JJ: They are bound to differ indifferent circumstances and at different stages. Motivating a scholar involves a psychological approach. There can be no single way of doing it. Reflection, sharing, introducing something new and challenging, discussion, asking them to write a diary, to return to an earlier interest—all of these can work in some measure. At times, all that is needed is to listen to them. One could also take up a collective project. But finally, there is no substitute for self-motivation; external pressures can sometimes turn out to be negative.

SR: Why do you think the emphasis on humanities education has declined and in what way have you personally addressed this issue? Your final evaluative comments on the role the classroom can take on in engineering social change.

JJ: This is a huge question with multiplied imensions; and is a world-wide phenomenon. More social and economic value is attached to science and technology, national educational budgets are uneven but have you noticed a shift? Younger people are now more attracted to social sciences, especially economics, legal studies and psychology. With several disciplines merging together or overlapping in their areas, human sciences are reflecting a slight resurgence. Employment venues have yet to come up to support this trend; but now it is thinkers, the better students who are being attracted towards human sciences. Part of the solution is to make their base wider by including texts which require intense analytical study.

SR: Professor Jasbir Jain, thank you so much for this interview, the time you invested and the ideas you shared.

JJ: It's been a pleasure. You have taken me back to the beginnings of a journey I had thought was over, but no, it is not. Thanks.

Sudha Rai formerly Professor and Head, Department of English, University of Rajasthan (Jaipur), is a recipient of the Senior Fellowship awarded by the Australia-India Council (2008-2009). She is currently Head, Department of Languages, Manipal University (Jaipur).

sudharai52@gmail.com

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