

# Iqbal Judge (IJ) Talks to Professor Joga Singh (JS)

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Iqbal Judge retired as Professor and Head, PG Department of English, PG Government College for Girls-11, Chandigarh after three decades of teaching. She now volunteers as a mentor to underprivileged young people. Her abiding interests include material production, teaching and campaigning on gender issues.

Professor Joga Singh is an acknowledged authority on linguistics. He has been instrumental in popularizing linguistics in Punjab, with over 50 research papers and five books to his name. He has guided more than 80 research scholars. A passionate advocate of education in the mother tongue and President of the Campaign for Language Equality and Rights Trust, Delhi, Professor Singh has toured widely, debunking myths about prioritizing English medium education.

**IJ:** Professor Singh, please tell us about your work and areas of interest?

**JS:** I can divide my linguistic activity into three parts: my research work, the popularization of linguistics, and mother tongue advocacy. My first research work was my M.Phil. dissertation on *Semantics of Adverbials of Location in Punjabi*, followed by a Ph.D. thesis on *Case and Agreement in Hindi: A GB approach*, which attempts to explain the complex interaction between case on [the] one hand and aspect, modality, transitivity, and agreement on the other. Lately, I have just completed the draft of a book on grammar in Punjabi titled *Aao Viaakran Labhiye* (Let's discover grammar).

**IJ:** How did your interest in linguistics develop?

**JS:** I must say it was by chance. I lived in a village and was late in submitting my application for postgraduate studies. Only the Department of Linguistics at Punjabi University, Patiala accepted my application!

Once I joined linguistics, my interest grew because I seem to have some innate urge to know about how things work. Thanks to Professor H.S. Gill and his associates like Professor Surjeet Lee, semiotic studies were already entrenched in Punjab. There was a lot of focus on the relationship of language to human life. When I joined Osmania University in 1983, I came in contact with Professor Chekuri Ramarao, which I consider a blessing. His wide range of academic and societal concerns and the knack for theorizing were immensely helpful.

I am fascinated by the warp and weft of language, in the structural sense, and was more engaged with its syntactic aspects till two decades back; but then, I started

seeing language being used as a rabid instrument to produce and perpetuate inequalities, discrimination and failure.

The neglect of and the discrimination against mother tongues and its dreadful consequences struck me. So, I am now in the battlefield, waging a war against the Indian powers that be, for Indian mother tongues.

**IJ:** You are credited with introducing the transformational theory in Punjab, and for your work in lexicography.

**JS:** Yes, that does give me some satisfaction. I have been editor of Punjabi-Punjabi and English-Punjabi dictionaries produced by the Department of Linguistics and Punjabi Lexicography of Punjabi University, Patiala. We coined/compiled about 8,000 linguistic terms in Punjabi, which was [sic] used for translating of books on mathematics, botany, pharmacy, physics, and political science into Punjabi.

Now, more than ever, I am engaged in the advocacy of mother tongues. I think that knowledge cannot play its emancipatory role unless it becomes commonsense. So, I work for dissemination of knowledge about language in an idiom accessible to common people. My booklet titled *International Opinion on Language Issues: Mother Tongue is the Key to Education, Knowledge, Science and English Learning* is available in 10 Indian languages, and I'm happy that it has generated and renewed enthusiasm among the mother tongue activists in India.

**IJ:** When you became the Chairperson of the Linguistics Department at Punjabi University, Patiala, the student enrolment in your department increased manifold. How were you able to achieve this? What

did you do to influence students to join linguistics?

**JS:** Yes! Student's enrolment increased tremendously from eight to about eighty. The major challenge, I think, for linguistics is that literary departments have occupied the space of language studies. In Punjab, this point was being strongly raised by the teachers of the Department of Linguistics, [and] by Professor Joginder Singh Puar in particular. The Patiala department had been a lively place earlier, but then, there weren't many students. So, the first challenge was to consolidate the ideological ground prepared by the elders. Also, due to those earlier efforts, the Punjabi B.A. and M.A. courses of the Punjabi University, Patiala, had a better share of language-related content in the curricula. The content exposed students to language studies, and in a way, compelled prospective Punjabi teachers to know at least something about linguistics.

The second challenge was the widespread perception that linguistics was an obscure and difficult kind of discipline. I addressed this by moving around in Punjab and talking about language structure in a simplified idiom and accessible Punjabi. I also spoke about the importance of mother tongue and the academic and career opportunities opened by linguistic studies.

The third challenge was of a technical kind. Anyone who had already done another postgraduate course was not eligible for admission into M.A. Secondly, only the graduates with language major in the B.A. degree courses were eligible for admissions to M.A in Linguistics. I got these conditions removed, and it immensely helped enrolment to increase. We were also able to restart the M.Phil. [programme] with great success.

And there were some non-academic reasons too. The culture in the linguistics department, compared to other departments in the University was such that the students felt comfortable and could converse with teachers as equals. This tradition was already there before I took over.

**IJ:** From some of your videos on YouTube, it seems that you are a strong advocate of mother tongue education. What drove you to focus on this?

**JS:** This again was by chance, as life generally is in India. In 2001, the Department of Punjabi Language Development asked me to present a paper in their Conference, titled, Futuristic Perspectives for the Development of Punjabi in the Global Context. Researching about the global linguistic situation in terms of the medium of education and language(s) of use in other formal linguistic domains, and their correlation with educational outcomes, international trade, economic growth, scientific and technological growth and development in general, learning of foreign languages and the global linguistic trends opened my own eyes. The presentation at the conference threw me entirely into mother tongue advocacy. What draws me into things like this is perhaps my tendency not to remain aloof from what happens around [me].

**IJ:** Advocates of MT education are often viewed as being inimical to English (and other local languages) nowadays. Would bilingual or even multilingual education be a bridge of rapprochement between the two? How could this be brought about?

**JS:** Dr. Iqbal, matters of historic

proportions cannot be decided to bring about the rapprochement. There is no convincing evidence that bilingual or multilingual education is a better option for education, or even for learning English. Also, the vested commercial and elite interests make such accusations (of being inimical to English) for exploiting popular perceptions about the English language.

**IJ:** What is the rationale for English to be made mandatory for teaching in elementary schools?

**JS:** Irrationality is the rationale. It is due to the perception that English is the panacea for all educational ailments, and it is a sure Aadhaar Card for entry to "heaven"; but such perceptions happen when we learn with eyes and ears shut and not by opening and using them.

**IJ:** Would you agree that teaching of English (to all) from the very beginning will help reduce the status of English as the language of/ for the elite?

**JS:** We can entertain this question only if we believe in the wrong perception that teaching English from the very beginning helps to learn English better than delayed exposure. Teaching English from Grade 1 has been there almost everywhere in India since the nineties. I don't think children have learnt any English with that. Secondly, foreign language medium widens the disparities in the country instead of reducing them.

Thirdly, aren't there hierarchies/disparities in the monolingual countries too?

Also, and which is more important, why should we flirt with English as the status marker, and that too when we have a far more accessible and immensely

beneficial option of eliminating this elite and non-elite (linguistic) division by taking English out. Why ask all to stand on their heads to make them (look) equal when we have the best option to request all to stand on their feet! Furthermore, it is not merely a question of equality; it is a question of taking India (educationally) forward.

**IJ:** What is your perspective on three-language formula or mother tongue implementation at the elementary/ primary level?

**JS:** Almost all prosperous countries of the world have only one-language formula at the initial stage. On average, a second/foreign language is introduced around the 9th year of the child's age. Firstly, the learning of any language other than the mother tongue should be optional. Secondly, given the global mobility of the younger lot, we can start second/foreign language teaching from Grade 6.

**IJ:** What is your opinion on the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recently rolled out, with reference to the language/s of instruction at all levels? How feasible do you think the ideas are in practice?

**JS:** I don't think anyone can produce a more confused, vague, and unprofessional policy than that. It proposes home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language as the medium of instruction till Grade 5, and preferably till eighth class and beyond: It doesn't utter a word on what is to be done where all of these are different. And it also adds an omnipotent qualifier 'wherever possible'. The vagueness in the policy is deliberate to keep the whims and

fancies of the government decision makers and the greed of private education players in full play. The ambiguity will ensure that mother tongue medium is not possible anywhere.

Also, this policy intends to ultimately entrench the murderous onslaught of privatization and commercialization unleashed on Indian education; and privatization/commercialization has only one leg, the English medium, to stand on. So, NEP will make English keep ruling Indian lands, hearts, and minds more firmly, ironically in this *Raashtravadi* era. The NEP also recommends science to be taught bilingually from Grade 6, so that the students can handle English medium well in higher classes. Thus, it is abundantly clear that there is no intention of providing higher education in mother tongues. Secondly, there is no evidence which shows that the English medium is a better option than the mother tongue medium for learning English well. The NEP itself states "a language does not need to be the medium of instruction for it to be taught and learned well" (p.13). This means that the medium of instruction is not essential for learning a language. What an amusement, thus, the proposal of bilingual teaching of science is!

An implication from this is that the NEP framers are either totally oblivious of the expert opinion, or are making false statements. The NEP also states, "As research clearly shows that children learn languages most quickly between the ages of 2 and 8 . . . children will be exposed to different languages early on . . . starting from the Foundational Stage onwards" (p. 13). It is a totally a [sic] false claim. A recent MIT study (with 6 lakh subjects) proves that the age after 15 is better than earlier for learning a second/foreign language.

The bane of Indian policy making, on the medium of instruction at least, is that it is rooted in stereotypes, impressions and myths. As for the feasibility of ideas in NEP, it contains only confusion and opinions counter to the attested ones. Can we implement confusion and such views? I don't think so.

**IJ:** What arguments/steps do you find in the NEP that have been taken to convince the country that mother tongue education is not against the teaching of English as a language?

**JS:** I don't find any arguments/steps except "songs of praise" for mother tongues, but it all is just hollow rhetoric, and NEP proposes no effective instruments for mother tongue education.

**IJ:** In Punjab, the State government has introduced English as the medium of instruction from Class one onwards. What is the impact of studying through English on mother tongue, on the cognitive development or acquisition of English? Could you mention any studies done in this regard?

**JS:** Unfortunately, we don't have any empirical study on that, or at least I am not aware of, but some trends are quite visible. People aren't too enthusiastic about entering the English medium stream in government schools; some of those who opted for English medium are reverting to Punjabi medium now; about one lakh and fifty thousand students have migrated from private schools, mostly English medium ones, to government schools this session alone. The awareness that has been generated lately about the advantages of mother tongue based education has played a significant role in this.

**IJ:** The teaching of English has been the subject of much research, especially in the context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Innovative techniques keep pouring in. Do you think the teaching of Punjabi, though it is the mother tongue, could be made more engaging through any such methods?

**JS:** I see SLA and the mastery of mother tongue as two different phenomena. We need to learn a second language, generally, for very restricted purposes. But mother tongue is a vehicle of our whole human existence in the anthropological, social, cultural, aesthetic, historical and cognitive senses. So, the means to acquire these (in a broad sense of the word) have also to be very different, though they could share some commonalities.

**IJ:** With an increasing number of Punjab's population settling abroad, where Punjabi is more likely to be spoken only at home or within the Punjabi community, how do you think it will impact the use and development of the language? Is there a possibility of the tongue slowly dying out, and what will be the impact of this?

**JS:** It will largely depend on the concentration of the Punjabi population in the respective place or country, their efforts for their language, and the response of the respective administrations. In the globalized world, multilingualism has also become a career/economic advantage. Many factors are in operation. The results will depend on the play of these factors. The signs are positive at some places but negative elsewhere.

**IJ:** From the general information available through the IELTS exams services, Punjab has the highest number of candidates in

the country, who seek education abroad. The urgency to learn English is visible through the mushrooming of English and IELTS training centres across the state; youngsters voice the regret that they were not taught English at an early age. The majority opinion that English is the language for global trade, education, science, etc. is deeply entrenched. In this context, how can the counter-argument for MT education (i.e. education in all subjects in Punjabi) be made convincing enough for them?

**JS:** I can think of three pieces of evidence to counter the opinion that English is the language for global trade, education, science and other advancements.

- a) Some countries have implemented mother tongue education and are developed in education, trade, economics, and human development;
- b) international opinion and the results of investigations on the issue also show this;
- c) lessons from successful international practices on mother tongue support this

To make the counter-arguments convincing, we must take this information to all the stakeholders. The negative consequences of English medium schooling is also out in the open now. As far as learning of the English language is concerned, the statements in black and white from agencies such as the British Council and UNESCO are eye-openers. They do marvels in making the counterargument convincing enough.

**IJ:** What measures can be taken in this regard, and by whom?

**JS:** We need to spread the word (truth) far and wide, to bring people on common

platforms, to engage with the policymakers and powers that be to get the favourable policy instruments created and implemented and to resist all harmful policies and practices actively; and the message must go in peoples' languages. We need to work mainly on three fronts. We need to bust the myths about language: that English is not the only language of science, knowledge and global communication; that the best way to learn English is studying in English medium; that our languages do not have the capacity to communicate modern concepts; and, that the country needs one common language to be united.

The second front is to break the hegemony of English, and to a certain extent of Hindi and also of other languages, over the rest of Indian mother tongues; and this has to be done with legal instruments. Still, a lot can be done in informal domains just by using mother tongues in these domains.

The third front is the creation of content in the mother tongues.

As for the question who is to do it, everyone will have to play a part in the realm one is associated with: the mother tongue activists, the academicians, the intelligentsia, the political activists, etc. The results will be in accordance with the amount of effort we all put in.

**IJ:** At this juncture in your life, how do you see your roles as an academician and as an activist?

**JS:** As an academician, I need to pass whatever I know about linguistics and language structure to the next generation. I have just completed a book on *An Introduction to Grammar* in Punjabi. My next plan is to write an accessible introduction to linguistics in Punjabi.

As an activist, I want to take the attested facts and arguments and other information related to language policy issues and discussions far and wide in Punjab and India. I also want to bring more and more people—mother tongue activists working for other Indian language mother tongues together—so that we can bring about the much-needed change.

**IJ:** Professor Singh, your life goals and activism are a refreshing change from the idea of armchair scholars locking themselves up in ivory towers! Indeed, your passionate commitment to the cause of MT education and your constant endeavour to strengthen the roots of Punjabi language among the people is laudable and inspiring. Thank you very much for allowing the readers of LLT to engage with you!

**JS:** My sincere thanks to you, Professor Ramakant, and the LLT team. *Sarbatdabhala!* (May all be benefited)

## Reference

National Education Policy 2020(2020). *Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India*. [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf)