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English And Higher Education

A survey published recently in a Bengali language newspaper provided telling confirmation of a fact that the Observer has frequently tried to highlight, namely, that higher education without suitable text-books in Bengali is impossible in Bengali. 75 per cent of the students polled said that they depended on the notes of their seniors passed on from generation to generation, because of their inability to understand text-books in English. Not having studies English with any care in the belief that as soon as they go to university, they will be able to dispense with it altogether, they find themselves at sea:

Standard books on history, economics, political science, philosophy, commerce—not to mention science subjects—are available only in English, and these are almost incomprehensible to the new generation of students. They do not consequently use the University library. What use indeed is it borrowing a book that you cannot make head or tail of?

Both translators and translations can hardly keep pace with the progress of knowledge. Besides, few of the standard books have been translated. The survey that we have referred to stated frankly that the students themselves realise that the certificates they earn are not worth much. It seems to us that the use and study of English at the post-secondary stage is to be given more importance and the study of English at the degree pass level made compulsory as before. Our present educational policy is filling the country with unemployable graduates who have learnt little that can be called higher education, and most of whom cannot, on account of their deficiency in English, acquire further knowledge in their subjects. Meanwhile unemployment among the "educated" keeps increasing.

We have said more than once that our entire programme of higher education needs to be reviewed dispassionately in the light of the country's interests. Emotionalism will not help. It has to be understood that there is a vital difference between higher and secondary education. That distinction is so often overlooked that many take it for granted that the question of text-books is an unimportant one.

More than anything else, our confusion about the place of English in higher education at the present stage of our development is responsible for the country's lack of progress.