

Graduates - Without English

Graduates writing to newspapers speak of the awkward predicament they find themselves in because the degree they have received from their university does not fit the bill of their prospective employers. The reason is they are graduates without English thanks to a decision by Dhaka university some years ago to drop English from the B A syllabus. There are reports also of children of high ranking officials or businessmen (with enough means) being sent abroad for higher (post-or even pre-secondary) studies in order that they could gain better proficiency in English (written and spoken). Equally disenchanting news is that Bangladeshi students admitted to courses of study in a foreign country (specially, the U K or the U S) are either failing to make grades and, in some cases, returned home for their inability to follow lectures in English.

Meanwhile, locally, the need for knowledge of English and the steady decline in its standards, as taught in schools, have led to English tutorial schools or houses springing up in most places in the capital and other cities. They are run on a largely commercial basis and charge fees so high that few but the affluent can avail themselves of this private tutorial help for their wards. It is no secret any longer that as a medium of communication or a vehicle of knowledge and intellectual culture English has long ceased to function in our society, it seems, both by policy and design. How and since when and why it happened is common knowledge as well as the protest from the press and academic circles. Men of vision and experience delivered warnings as to the results such sighted state policy on education (or about English) would lead to. Those feared results have started emerging.

There is no mistaking them or the answer they call for provided the authorities that have launched the decline care to look at them, turn around and set about repairing the damage done. It will be no exaggeration to say that not only have university courses dropped English. English has been as good as banned from everything that nearly for two centuries and a half had so much to do with it as the most nourishing component of a bilingual culture.

Kept only as an academic routine in the education system i.e. taught (as would be claimed by the education authorities) as a compulsory second language at the secondary stage it has over the years stayed very much on the sidelines. The seriousness with which it is to be taught has been conspicuously absent. Its exclusion from courts of law, offices diplomatic activities locally managed, from T V and radio programmes from discussions and debates in schools, colleges and universities and as a medium of instruction in higher studies and research activities have practically driven the last nail into its coffin.

A bilingual society for more than two centuries, as we have said, Bangladesh should not have been turned monolingual overnight by legislation or an executive order. Nor need it ever be at all. No other country in the region (subcontinent or S Asia) has done so. English remains as undisturbed and flourishing as naturally after partition in India or Pakistan, for instance, as it had before. Neither any other country across the third world since the end of colonial rule has done, or over thinking of doing, so. This paper has been the only public voice raised in vain against this fatal policy. The immediate need is to re-examine our policy on English.