

In Our Times

Schools That Teach In English

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ARE the English medium schools in this country doing as well as they should? The question does not relate to their physical or financial well-being, because in that respect many of them are indeed pretty well off. The inquiry, one ought to be made aware of at the outset, has much to do with the thought of whether these schools are proving capable of imbuing in the young a sense of their tradition and cultural moorings. But before any assessment or conclusive arguments are made about the issue, one should remember that what passes for English-medium schools is in the real sense establishments by the rather innocuous name of tutorials. That is in more ways than one a safety device for people who run such institutions. The safety relates, in the concrete sense, to the manner in which these schools measure up to matters of a financial nature. But more of that later. What has been talked about in recent years is pretty basic — that institutions which seek to provide English-medium instruction to the Bengali young have often fallen behind in the task of imparting the historical and, in broad measure the cultural, to them. Parents have sometimes been worried — and these parents are those who are acutely conscious of how their children turn out intellectually in the end — about the absence of thought or sheer inadequacy of the teaching of history at the schools their wards go to. Plainly, the subject of history is skirted around, for reasons grounded (and this is quite evident from the circumstantial evidence) on politics. Too much has gone wrong or awry with the nation's political history to allow for an open discourse of the facts. The point is well understood.

But the complaint does not lie there insofar as the English-medium tutorials are concerned. The fundamental thought about the tutorials is that little effort is made in the classroom to acquaint the young with the major outlines of their cultural heritage. Over the years, a good number of such schools have of course taken steps to create an awareness of heritage among their students. The result is an improved degree of enthusiasm over such watershed events as Ekushey and Victory Day. But, then again, the

important factors which buttress an understanding of history at the initial stage, for the young, are conveniently glossed over. The result is palpably disturbing. The young at these schools, while ultimately growing into advanced age levels in an unmistakably westernised sense of the meaning, remain unaware of such essential ingredients of Bangladesh's history as the Six Point movement, the story of the genocide in 1971 and the tales of the men who conducted the war of national liberation. The shadow of 1975 is certainly working. It works everywhere. Which is one very plausible reason why the country has been paying a price for the past two decades. But with the tutorials, the problem has largely been one of staying well away from an invocation of the truth. The consequence has been confusion. Some of the tutorials, unable to abandon a study of history, have opted for a reference to tracts published in India. That is hardly any cause for complaint. But what surely irks one is that such texts are taken advantage of for that part of history which stops at the point where the subcontinent frees itself of British domination. It is pretty much clear that teachers are not willing to go into an enumeration of the events which led to the partitioning of India before it could walk out into freedom. This in turn prevents the authorities of the tutorials from proceeding into later events that led to the birth of Bangladesh. Of course, the occasions of national history are observed with due solemnity or gaiety, as the case may be. But there is that wee feeling that somewhere, somehow, the strands have come loose. It is all a disjointed process.

The truth that must not be lost sight of at this point, however, is that the English medium schools are doing a creditable job through making it possible for a very large section of people to have their children educated. In pretty substantive ways. That has taken a lot of the pressure off the existing schools, those which have functioned under the normal rules as operated by the various boards in the country. And yet there remains the question of whether the education provided by the tutorials is in the final analysis creating a sound,

intellectual base for the country. The worry is palpable. The threat of elitism is always there. A system of instruction which consciously or otherwise leads to the predominance of things westernised cannot but create ripples of despair. A very different lifestyle, even among young people rooted in the Bengali middle class, appears to be emerging at one point or the other. The reason cannot be difficult to decipher. These young lack the basics of their culture. And they are in that position because little effort is expended into reminding them of the homes and the families and the history they have sprouted from. They are not to be blamed for the lapse. After all, there can be little cause for happiness when a leading English-medium tutorial tells its students and their parents in its yearbook that the school was established with the goal of providing sound education for Muslim Bangladeshi students. Note the emphasis on the term 'Muslim'. It becomes at once clear that this particular institution has for its operating principle the objective of doing everything possible to keep secular instruction at bay. The contradiction is not to be missed. National history is deliberately kept at arms's length. The western code of life is not discouraged. Worse, the student is reminded of the particular religious affiliation he swears by. These are intimations of trouble, if not downright danger. And they need to be tracked to the last detail. The national interest, be it remembered, is in no way a proposition that can be trifled with.

The thought of education apart, the issue of the finances of the English-medium schools has for a long time been a subject of intense concern. The expenses parents incur at these institutions are mind-boggling. Perhaps it all has a definitive link with the exclusive nature of the education imparted to the young? Assuming that the response to the question is somewhat positive, there still remains the aching feeling that much of what the tutorials do by way of collecting finances from guardians comes under the enormous need for scrutiny. The surprising bit is that hardly, if any, effort has gone into an investigation of the financial

activities of the schools on the part of the auditing authorities. Fees are high. That is comprehended very well. Besides, once one considers the price that must be paid to enable a young man or woman go through Ordinary and Advanced Levels, the idea of the high amount of money slipping out as fees becomes fairly easy to follow. What does not become that easy to understand is the other aspect. And that is the fascinating sum the guardians must pay as something called yearly charges. Note that these charges are handed over to the school authorities every year at the beginning of the academic term. In most cases, it is not explained to the guardian where the sums so paid go. The fact is that most of the tutorials are woefully lacking in laboratory facilities and the like.

There are no playgrounds for the young. The worst part of the story is that the schools are housed in residential buildings under contractual terms with the landlords. It is therefore not surprising to spot, once every few years or so, certain schools shifting from one area to another.

It is perhaps time to bore into the details of the English-medium education programme in Bangladesh. The goal should not be a persecution of those who have decided that good, modern education for the Bengali young is in order. It ought rather to be one of ensuring a streamlining of the whole process in consonance with national objectives. Note, though, that any idea of government or administrative control over the institutions should be discouraged. But what must be emphasised, over and over, is the overall objective of discouraging an education scheme based on a wide divergence of academic perspectives. The young man and woman stepping into an ever-widening world of knowledge coming their way courtesy of the English language ought also to be told, without any equivocation, that their job is to plant the feet firmly on home territory before branching out into the wider world. The task of the English-educated should be to inquire into the nature of things. It must certainly not be one of condescension towards matters pertaining to the indigenous.