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The steep decline

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English has been a part of our formal education system for a little over a century and a half. But for various historical, socio-political and other reasons it does not enjoy the same status or have the same kind of importance or necessity as it used to have during the pre-Partition British colonial days or the post-Partition Pakistan phase of our political existence.

With the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation Bengali for obvious reasons has not only become the only official language but also assumed overwhelmingly predominance in almost all spheres of life and activity.

As a result, English has been reduced to the status of a foreign language whose importance is being considered peripheral rather than central to our educational and other needs.

Although it has continued to remain a part of our curriculum and syllabus upto HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) level, its standard has been plummeting over the period of nearly two decades. This steep decline in standards can be attributed to:

1. until recently official apathy in formulating a well-defined and well-thoughtout foreign language policy;

2. indifference of the authorities concerned to take timely and pragmatic measures to stem the endemic rot that inexorably set in;

3. tendency to cling to the old traditional literature-based syllabus for language learning at particular levels; and

4. inability or inadequacy of the present system to turn out in large numbers competent English language teachers conversant with modern methods of language teaching and learning.

Against the background

of this fast deteriorating

standard, there are

encouraging signs both from

official and non-official

quarters that something

should be done to check such

deterioration and if possible raise the standard. In recent times we have seen public statements in the Press from professional groups like lawyers, teachers etc. in favour of English.

Even a statutory body like the Public Service Commission in their last Annual Report (1987) spoke out in favour of English. Plenty of editorials, particularly in English dailies and weeklies, write-ups from columnists, letters to the editor columns have come out for English.

All this boils down to the fact that there is a growing realization among the conscious and educated section of the people that without English we cannot make much headway in this highly competitive modern world of science and technology, trade and commerce, regional and international relations and communications.

In this paper we are

going to look at this issue of

importance and necessity

from three broad perspec-

tives: historical, interna-

tional and national.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

For various practical reasons the British colonialists took nearly eight decades to introduce English Education System in this sub-continent. Before that they toyed with the idea of whether to retain the traditional well-developed indigenous education system or run a parallel system with schools and colleges run by European missionaries.

Rev. William Adam, a Scottish missionary, was appointed by Governor General William Bentinck on January 20, 1835 to undertake a field survey of the indigenous educational institutions in the Bengal Presidency. Between 1835 and 1838 he submitted three reports which revealed that there were one hundred thousand schools of various categories in the provinces of Bengal and Bihar which had a population of 40 million.

This was indeed an impressive figure and on the basis of it Adam was in favour retaining the system with official patronage.

But ignoring his recommendations Lord Bentinck accepted those of Lord Macauley who was a member of the Governor-General's Executive Council. Deliberately misinterpreting Article 43 of the Education Charter of 1813 passed by the British Parliament, Macauley recommended the introduction of English Education System where English would be the medium of instruction in secondary schools and colleges.

That the system which came into effect on March 7, 1835 was introduced with not very pious intentions was borne out by the now off-quoted remark of Macauley about its prime objective which was to create a class of people who would be Indian in blood and color but English in taste, in opinions and in intellect.

It did indeed create an army of petty clerks to run the colonial administration of the British Raj, but it is also a fact that it was through this much-maligned system have come out thousands of intellectuals, scholars, scientists, doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, politicians, statesmen and other professionals some of whom did indeed make outstanding contributions in their respective fields.

If one makes a comparative study of the scores of giants in intellectual, literary, scientific, legal, political and other fields that system produced and the relative scarcity of those in subsequent generations, it would make an interesting reading and provide sufficient food for thought for the discerning people.

Products of that system

who are still alive bemoan

the deplorably poor

standard of English that

prevails now everywhere.

of English

While sympathising with

their opinion it must be

stated in all fairness that

English at that time was

learnt not only through

English classes and their

teachers, but also used to be

reinforced through other

subjects which were also

taught through English.

It was because English

was the medium of

instruction. Besides, the

standard of teaching and

teachers was much higher

on an average. On top of that

the motivation of learning

the language was much

higher, because without

proficiency in it nobody

could hope to get anywhere

in any kind of important or

worthwhile job.

Competition was so

high that it automatically

raised the general standard

even at the matriculation

level. Under that system

where motivation came

automatically even gram-

mar-translation approach

proved effective in

developing reading and

writing skills, but not the

other two skills like

listening and speaking

which had little scope for

practicing outside the

classrooms.

The Japanese and the

Chinese, by the way,

nowadays are experiencing

similar problem in their

respective countries. They

know their grammar

thoroughly well but not their

usage in practical

communicative situations.

So in those British

colonial days both the

importance and necessity of

English were beyond

doubt. Nobody except the

Muslims to learned any

member of Indian Muslim

community to keep

themselves deliberately

aloof from the English

education system for several

decades was primarily their

false sense of pride at being

former rulers.

On hindsight it was such

an irrational and

responsible attitude for

heavy price in terms of lost

job opportunities because of

educational backwardness

resulting in socio-economic

as well as political and

intellectual stagnation and

bankruptcy.

That allowed the other

dominant community-the

Hindus-to take full

advantage of the new

situation by seizing with

both hands the opportunity

of getting English education

and make a head start over

their arch-rivals who had

been their former rulers.

As we know, the Hindus

particularly the Bengali

bhadraloks or the gentry by

establishing through

English education a

mutually beneficial and

satisfactory relationship

with their British colonial

masters succeeded in

holding almost a mono-

polistic sway not only at the

lower and mid-tier of the

colonial administration

almost all over India but

also over other professions

like teaching, medicine,

engineering, law, trade and

commerce and so on.

MUSLIMS

The Muslims, on the

other hand, awoke so to say

from their slumber only to

find themselves a truly

backward community which

had either deprived

themselves or had been

deprived deliberately by the

colonial rulers. Whatever

might have been the cause of

that deprivation, it needed a

big and almighty push to get

even terms with the other

dominant community.

That push was provided

by a far-sighted visionary

like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan

who started the Aligarh

Mosque by founding

Aligarh Muslim College in

1875 at Aligarh College in

India.

That was the beginning

of a Muslim resurgence

which saw the establish-

ment of Muslim League

in Dhaka in 1906

culminating in Pakistan

Movement and the partition

of India on a communal and

ideological basis.

To be continued