



# 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 standing 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-thought-out 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 columnists 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 perspectives: historical, international 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 of retaining the system with official patronage.

But ignoring his recommendations Lord Bentinck accepted those of Lord Macaulay 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, Macaulay 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 Macaulay 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 grammar-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 question. Nobody except the Muslims needed any prodding to learn it.

What prompted the members 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 irresponsible attitude for which they had to pay a very 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 monopolistic 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 on 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 Movement by founding Aligarh Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College in 1877 at Aligarh in UP in India.

That was the beginning of a Muslim resurgence which saw the establishment of Muslim League in Dhaka in 1905 culminating in Pakistan Movement and the partition of India on a communal and ideological basis.

To be continued