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English—And Knowing The Country

Young people studying in English medium institutions in the country have always been up against a number of problems. That of course has little to do with matters such as the unwise decision of the early seventies to remove English as a medium of instruction from schools throughout the country. Fortunately, the gross consequences arising out of that old decision have been comprehended too well by the nation's conscious citizens. And because it has, there is today an opportunity for boys and girls to take advantage of the many opportunities thrown their way by a profusion of English medium schools in the country. To be sure, a vast number of these schools are in the private sector, and not all of them are in the position of calling themselves well-off, either in the matter of teaching quality or on the question of sustainability finance-wise. But that has not upset many sensibilities, and if one has noticed over the years, schools willing to provide education to the young in English have simply proliferated. Perhaps one could suggest that there are far too many of them than necessary. But there is the other side of the story. There is hardly any such school (tutorials are the more appropriate form to be used) where young parents inclined to giving their child a better form of education and in the process have him come home with a new-found dignity do not throng pretty enthusiastically. Call it human nature, this urge for a climb up the social ladder. But there it is. Besides, if these schools are in the end able to inject real intelligence and a desire for knowledge into the minds of the young, there should hardly be any reason for complaint.

But let one take note of the idea that went into a gathering of teachers and students of English medium schools in Dhaka city on Saturday. The crowd was an enthusiastic lot, perhaps drawn to the meeting from a sense of camaraderie or plain defensiveness. It had to be either of those, for the subject of the meeting concerned the need of the child in the English medium school to know more about the country. The question could then legitimately arise as to why such queries should come up in the first place. Isn't it understood that a student will be taught all there is to know about his or her country in the overall process of his education? The answer should be an emphatic yes here. But where education at the tutorials has been concerned, there has been the growing feeling that in their enthusiasm to provide a proper English education to Bangladeshi students, these schools often tend to ignore the overall concept of national history. Now surely that would be a pretty parochial way of looking at the situation, for there is hardly anyone who will say that he is not interested in knowing more about his country. Yet something about the curricula at these institutions speaks of the many holes that could be plugged and that too by the teachers themselves. If the complaint comes that the rapidity of political change in the country has coloured the perceptions of many where the subject is national history, all one can say here is one is sorry. But there is yet a lot that can be done here, by the very bright young men and women who have cause to be teaching in these schools.

It is unfortunate, but it is true, that what should have been done by the education authorities in the matter of allowing students to see things about their country in the proper perspective is now the job of the schools themselves. But there ought to be a caveat about the schools here. They generally deal with students preparing for Ordinary and Advanced Leavels under the University of London. And, quite naturally, the prescribed syllabi will need to be followed. But on their own the authorities of the schools could take up the all-important task of acquainting their students with the social, cultural and political heritage they are all heir to here in Bangladesh. Teachers being what they are, they could inspire the young with a recapitulation of facts, those that have gone into the making of this country and its traditions. But let there be a note of caution here, and it is that those who set out to do the teaching of national history, encompassing as it does all aspects of social, economic and literary growth, first undertake for themselves the onerous job of educating themselves on the issues before they pontificate at morning assembly. The fear remains (and it is that way because there are pedagogues in some of these schools who have often been found twisting national history around a little, to our everlasting regret) that attempts will be made to influense young minds through a politicisation of facts. That is a danger one must be on guard against. The goal, we need to remember, is to create a society where merit will count. But merit counts for precious little if it does not come accompanied by a love of country and sympathy for all that it has had to endure.

On a bigger scale, the goal of the people of this country is to fashion a social arrangement that will bring about a fusion of ideas. Elitism cannot be the dream of our society. But in all things that we do, there will be the constant need to do those in style. Let that be our spur to added knowledge.