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English Medium Education In Bangladesh

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ENGLISH medium education in Bangladesh has been witnessing a rejuvenation after a period of lull of over a decade. It is therefore, time we re-examined its position in the socio-cultural setting and looked into the mode of operation of the English medium schools in the country.

Although we have been observing mushroom growth of English medium schools, a large number of them are not fully English medium, nor are they upto the level of high school graduation.

The fact that these schools are to operate in a Bengali speaking society makes their position rather indistinct, if not precarious. To enunciate this point further and educational institution, as a mini society belonging to its own culture and tradition, while exercising that role mostly in an alien language poses a serious challenge to the people sincerely concerned. How far should an educational institution proceed in its curriculum and its adjuncts in order to function successfully within the perimeter of its culture on the one hand and the English language, its vehicle of operation on the other? Many such questions can be raised and argued on when educational institutions are looked from a broader point of view and objectives of educating children are seen in correct perspective. However, to most who are actively engaged in English medium education, this fact remains obscure if not overlooked. An educational institution is to be seen in the socio-cultural context to which it belongs. All such institutions therefore, lend themselves further to appropriate scrutiny by the society.

The nature of English medium schools has been rendered more obscure by wrong perceptions prevalent even among the educated citizenry. One such misconception is that they are synonymous with kindergartens. Kindergarten can best

be described as a primary phase of schooling where teaching is to be carried on according to the German educational reformer Froebel, in a relaxed manner by means of physical exercises, games, movements etc. through which children are to learn basic skills and social behaviour.

Any phase beyond this level is no more a kindergarten. While this is one point, the other is, most of the existing kindergartens or kindergartens as part of a primary, middle or a secondary school are more formal in its nature and therefore, very much distant from the Froebelian system. This can be further substantiated by the fact that many playgroup, nursery children are to be taken care of by tutors at home. However, teaching the 'basics' primarily having in practice in our schools even at such lower levels, it seems that society has also been conditioned to accept such a system.

Again, some of the schools are not fully English medium in the sense that speaking English in and out of class may not be very much stressed and therefore a child may not hear much of English before he himself can pick it up.

This is a point of outmost significance, as a favourable environment for learning English from out-of-school sources is almost absent in Bangladesh. It can further be contended on the point of English medium schools being not fully English medium is in their essence. If such schools have been patterned after schools in England or America even to a minimal, two things stand out in stark contrast to their system particularly at the elementary level. These are lack of awareness of individual difference in a learning situation and the other, the bulk of homework given to the young children. As a corollary to this decisions on such issues like promotion, retention of pupils recur in our schools.

Perhaps the strangest thing that occurs in this context is when a child fails miserably in any of these classes having attended the same school for four or five years or even more. Since the system by and large does not fit the child, rather a child is to fit himself in the system makes our schools estranged from the philosophy of education underlying schools in the developed countries.

Tuition Fees

One pet criticism about English medium schools in Bangladesh is that they are very expensive and, therefore, money-making businesses. While there may be some truth in this viewpoint, a good standard English medium school is supposed to maintain a very good quality of teaching staff, let alone other facilities for co-curricular activities. Again, good standard of teaching geared to high school graduation under foreign Boards necessitates appointing teachers with expertise and thoroughly familiar with the system. Definitely there is still a dearth of teachers of this standard and quality accompanied by fluent and at the same time correct command of both oral and written English, a problem that has perhaps been widespread due to mindless decision of neglecting English for such a long time in our country. It should have been recognized long ago that no language, be it English or any other, can pose a threat to one's mother tongue. The former ones reside in one's brain only, whereas the latter not only in the brain but in one's kingdom of heart.

Although the government has been rather concerned about the English medium schools in the recent past and has given some directives as to their amount of tuition fees, selection of books etc., nevertheless no financial aid in some form

or other can be expected of it normally. Therefore, tuition fees being the only source of income, all expenses including any development work of the school are to be borne by these. Now looking at the other side of the story, some schools may function as money-making businesses while deviating themselves sharply from the ideal of such an institution. Nevertheless, these schools do also thrive mainly because of demands by an ever-increasing population in our country. Some people who set up English medium schools bear misconceptions such as high fees etc. would enhance image of the school. This is undoubtedly an unprofessional and a myopic view aimed at attracting a very small segment of the society while this clientele in their turn are contented with things exogenous to English medium education at least initially. There cannot be any lack of consensus about the view that quality education is costly everywhere in the world but any such increase of cost should ideally be correlated with benefits that are tangible, otherwise this trend in Bangladesh can very justifiably be regarded as poorly planned and therefore a mere fashion.

Since the government have at least taken cognizance of the existence of English medium schools, they should now be assessed in their entirety, particularly on the locus of their quality of education, and last but not least, as existing in the socio-cultural milieu of our country.

Perhaps only then recognition of institutions in the process will take place paving ways for seeking cooperation from the government. It is also time to feel the necessity of extending English medium education upto tertiary and higher levels. Only a thoroughly good quality of education can uplift a nation and leave a legacy to be remembered.