



EDITORIAL

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Essential English

In a late realization that English education is of key importance for intellectual and scientific enlightenment, the government in the second week of January decided to introduce English as a compulsory subject from class 1 to class 12. In the last several years the neglect and apathy toward English education has resulted in a considerable vacuum in the field of English. Contrary to expectations nurtured by many, ignoring English did not lead to the development of the Bengali language either. That the government has belatedly come to grips with the cold reality is a stark reminder of the fact that simultaneous with the fall in the standard of English, the standard of education in general and higher education in particular has taken a nosedive.

Nobody disputes that Bengali should be made the medium of instruction in all the spheres possible and Bengali should be supported, enriched and patronized by all quarters. But the learning of Bengali and emphasis on the mother tongue does not mean that we shall ignore or neglect the study of English. Only some half-baked language chauvinists can resort to such deadly exercises at the peril of a whole generation. Partly because of the shortsightedness of some political elements and partly because of a desire to gain cheap popularity by the leaders of successive governments, things have come to such a pass that English is virtually a banished language among the youth. The total circulation of English language newspapers has either gone down or stagnated. Bengali had been our state language since 1952, but the mortal blow to English was given during the Bangladesh period. Posterity will never forgive us for closing its window to the world which is the English language.

The world today is interdependent more than ever before. Because of various historical, social and scientific reasons English emerged as the preeminent international language. One's quest for modern knowledge and culture will remain incomplete or stunted if one is not familiar with the English language. The argument for gaining access to knowledge through Bengali translations of foreign works is void on the face of it as the mass of literature on every single subject being put out by scholars around the globe is beyond the capability of any people to translate to the mother tongue.

The only logical conclusion is that for higher studies there is no alternative to learning English. It is sine qua non for modernization. China, the Soviet Union, Japan, West Germany, all are making vigorous attempts to learn English quickly. We have an edge, again partly because of historical reasons. Another fact that needs to be mentioned is that it has been observed throughout the last two centuries that mostly people proficient in English have contributed to the development of Bengali language and literature. Eminent poets like Jivananda Das, Sudhindra Nath Datta, Buddha Dev Bose, Samar Sen, Bishnu Dey, Shamsur Rahman, Obaidullah Khan are all students of English literature. From that practical experience, we can come to the conclusion that for enriching Bengali also it is necessary to cultivate English.

Thousands of Bangladeshi students are now studying in India, England and the U.S.A. A large number of them are even schoolgoing boys and girls. And they study in English medium institutions whereas English was being utterly neglected back home. The dangerous consequence of this situation would be that those boys would be trained in the best educational institutions of the world while their poor brothers and sisters will be deprived of modern thinking, modern culture and modern enlightenment because the door had been closed to them by neglecting the English language. It will ultimately result in the creation of two hostile classes -- foreign-educated enlightened rulers and the ignorant, uninitiated masses. The former will control politics, business, administration while the latter will sink deeper in the quagmire of ignorance, bigotry and backwardness.