

The Status And Importance
Of English

It is to be hoped that the three-day seminar on the status and importance of English held from March 9 to March 11 under the direct aegis of the Ministry of Education marks a turning point in administrative thinking in the matter. It is also significant that the participants invited to take part in the discussions embraced a wide spectrum of educated public opinion, and were not limited to teachers of English who, unfortunately, are often thought to have a vested interest in the continuance of English. They included men of science, business executives, professional men, government representatives and journalists. A common realisation brought them together. We hope they were able to disentangle the issue of English from the clouds of political emotion which have hitherto interfered with national analysis of the reasons why we cannot suddenly overnight banish English from our national life without grave detriment to the cause of national advancement.

We have repeatedly at considerable risk of being misunderstood urged that English was not the monopoly of any section in our society and that if it has to be retained, it must be taught competently and adequately. To say that a few teachers could on their own shoulder the burden of maintaining and improving the standards of English is to misconceive the whole problem. They need the support and cooperation of the educated public at large in the matter.

The recently held seminar was, we think, the first attempt of its kind in which the choice of participants as well as the choice of subjects for discussion indicated that the teaching of English was not a mere matter of producing annually a handful of students capable of appreciating a few lyrics or a few novels or stories written in a foreign language. The importance of English in science and technology is today greater than ever. For us to imagine that any progress in the acquisition of scientific and technological studies is possible without English by depending on translation alone is, may we say without meaning to hurt any sensibilities, a mere delusion. Other things apart, where are the translators to come from? And supposing it were possible for a band of translators to keep pace with the terrific speed of scientific and technological work, a policy of this kind would mean letting the place of translation determine the quality and standard of higher education, and also that our university graduates would on their own be incapable of undertaking independent scientific work. A situation of this nature would cripple us intellectually for decades to come.

The immediate task before the country is to repair the damage that years of neglect and confusion have inflicted on the standard of English in our universities, colleges and schools. To let English continue nominally and to allow it to be reduced to a level where knowledge of English has virtually come to signify little more than acquaintance with the English alphabet is to incur unnecessary waste. The survival of English in the syllabuses must no longer be treated as a mere legacy from the colonial past. We retain it in our own interest.

We hope the scholars who took part in the seminar succeeded in arriving at a consensus not only on the need for English but on the necessity of common approach to how it should be taught not as a dead classical subject, but as a subject which holds the key to our scientific, technological and industrial future. The vision that we contemplate of Bangladesh is of a

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