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Collapse Of University Education In Bangladesh

THE first thing that strikes anyone who ponders the picture of higher education in Bangladesh, is that it is one of unrelieved gloom and despair; the system is on the edge of virtual collapse. One after another, institutions of higher learning, colleges as well as universities, are closing down following violent clashes between rival student groups having close links with one major political party or another.

Owing to frequent closure of the universities and unscheduled interruption in the academic work session-jam is intensifying causing widespread frustration among students and their guardians. Mounting violence has robbed the university campuses of the last vestiges of security these used to have. Examinations get postponed, and halls of residence vacated on incredibly short notice. Students have absolutely no security of their life and property. More and more guardians who are fortunate and affluent send their children abroad where there is no session-jam and no threat to life.

These are all too well known facts—and everybody feels that these problems need to be addressed as urgently as possible. But, unfortunately no effort, either on the part of the Government or the institutions themselves or the guardians for that matter, is in sight that seeks a lasting solution.

As for our academic standards, the less said the better; these are appallingly low. Chaotic conditions apart, two clear reasons stand out. First, the debacle that has taken place in the secondary stage. Teaching of all major subjects in general, and English in particular, has completely collapsed. As a consequence a yawning chasm has occurred between higher secondary and University education. Most new entrants to the universities find themselves at a loss when they come to interact with their teachers. It appears that they do not speak the same idiom. Teachers can hardly take for granted the necessary preparation these new entrants are expected to have made before they come up to the university. Meaningful interaction is, therefore, seriously impeded. Higher education, barring a few disciplines that call for practical work, is essentially book-oriented. Gradual loss of the command of English in the new entrants to the University severely limits their access to the resources in the university. As a result the average student seems to be getting less and less dependent on

original books in the university library.

Unfortunately this is also partially true of some the new generation of teachers who grew up and completed their education during the last two decades. They are unwilling victims of a system as much as their student. Our educational planners paid scant attention to the fact that by radically reducing the importance of English in our higher education system they deprived our teachers as well as learners the fullest advantage of the one foreign language that could give them unlimited access to the treasury of world letters—thereby causing incalculable damage to the quality of higher education itself. This is certainly not the only cause of the great decline in standards; but it surely is the major cause.

Reasonable competence in the English Language is still an indispensable condition for meaningful performance at the university level, most available text-books being still in English. While on the one hand we profess egalitarian values for our society, we encourage, on the other, elitism by depriving the greater section of the populace the benefits of a highly academically useful Second Language i.e. English.

To remedy this state of affairs some have suggested teaching of the English Language as a library language. This is a fair enough proposition. But this will bear close scrutiny. It is common knowledge that for all practical purposes of researchers and lay readers the great classical languages like Greek, Latin and Sanskrit are no more than library languages. These are not living, spoken tongues. But to retrieve information from texts written in these languages one needs thorough grounding in the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of these languages—which means a dependable competence in these library languages requires painstaking and systematic schooling. The case of English as a library language shall not be any different.

I bring in here the case of ESP (English For Special Purposes) which was espoused by the British Council in the eighties. This was introduced in some institutions of higher learning with great enthusiasm, Chittagong into political factions. These are

about twenty years old now—and these need to be reviewed in the light of their working in the last two decades; and suitable amendments may also be made, since wideranging aberrations are noticed in the administrative and academic practices of the Universities resulting from an all too liberal interpretation of many provisions of the Acts and Ordinance. It is, however, my considered view that no amount of legislative reform could possibly bring order and discipline back to the campuses and restore academic values in their pristine glory. Our teachers have a great and an urgent role to play in this regards.

Our university teachers who pride themselves on being intellectuals, should do some soul-searching right away. May we not humbly ask of them as to what their contribution is towards bringing the nation together by explicating issues over which it stands divided? Helping achieve national unity should have been uppermost in their priorities. Instead, at least some of them through their ex-cathedra prescriptive pronouncements, have helped differences to widen and dissensions to deepen.

Society must wake upto the realization that there are areas in our national life which politics must not invade—education is one such area which has got to be kept free from partisan politics. Educators, politicians, and government in power—all must realise that a consensus to this effect is to be developed before it is too late.

National disunity remains the most important single factor affecting the institutions of higher learning. Our national life continues to be plagued by dissensions of all conceivable kind. As long as these continue, and the socio-economic fabric continues to be eroded by corruption and malpractices, it would be idle to expect spectacular changes to take place in our universities.

It is my firm conviction that our last hope still lies with our teachers and students. Teachers have a great and responsible role to play in bringing about harmony and unity in the university campuses if only they remain true to their prime avocation, and abjure divisive political affiliations—at least to the extent these do

not affect their academic commitment.

gong University being one of them and with the fullest support of our English Department.

As a senior member of the Department the ESP idea left me rather cool; I was sceptical from the beginning—but I hasten to add that I lent my full support to the experimentation. Teaching began in three departments by a small group of teachers who had earlier taken special courses in ESP. But before long it was found that the idea was not catching on, in fact the experiment ended in failure—and I was not surprised. The students for whom ESP was meant did not have enough rudiments of the English language to make meaningful use of English for Special Purposes. The students concerned knew not enough English for ordinary purposes. Experience with ESP elsewhere was not different either; and the British Council has since abandoned this project.

To come back to my original position. English, whether we like it or not, is still in Bangladesh as more than a mere foreign language; it commands the status of a Second Language. And this distinction is of the essence for pedagogic or endagogic purpose. I state in unequivocal terms that the status of English as a Second Language has got to be recognized by our Academic Establishment, by making necessary reforms of the syllabuses at Secondary, Higher Secondary and also at University Levels.

If we fight shy of English as a second language, as we have been doing since some years now at our own peril, and settle for English as a library language even then, I am afraid, there will be no short-cut to it; teaching of English whether at secondary, higher secondary or at university stages has got to be strengthened—and strengthened now to save our higher education.

There was a time—and this was true until fifties and mid sixties—when bright young people used to look forward to university jobs with some degree of priority. Unfortunately the situation has changed; and teaching positions have suffered considerable depreciation in the job market for reasons too well known to be enlarged upon.

Many have, and not without some justification, put the blame on the University Acts for the rise of populism among teachers and their divi-