

English, We Need It

—Prof. A.A.M. Azizullah

IN 1984 English was abolished as a compulsory subject from Degree pass level and about two years and a half after, from primary stage. And the status of English was further degraded when Bengali was made a compulsory medium of written expression in courts and offices.

It is, however, very much heartening to learn that long after a period of doldrum and apathy towards the popular outcry for reinstating English in its rightful place in education and other fields, the Government has awakened to a sense of realisation of its indispensability.

To make English compulsory in schools and colleges and start its teaching right from the primary stage will be quite a move towards right direction in keeping with our need in education and other spheres of life. Nobody denies the necessity for mother tongue. It has been rightly made the first language of the country. But this in no way justifies total negligence of English or in other words as has been remarked by the Bangladesh Observer (Aug. 20) its transformation "into an academic Cinderella, neglected and degraded, used as a pawn in political debates....". The analogy may further be drawn by reference to a Bengali mythological story (to Sat Bhair Champa) wherein the younger Queen was banished on false grounds of bearing no child but a cat. But she did bear a child who later on proved to be an asset to the kingdom.

English likewise has been banished although on grounds untenable in facts and circumstances but its learning is fruitful and full of immense prospects.

Or why is this crazy rush for its learning at ill or half-equipped English medium institutions, tutorial homes etc. at a great cost? The only answer is the learning of English pays in the long run. It is a gateway to upto date knowledge of science and technology, arts and jurisprudence etc.

We will learn it effectively so as to be able to read, write, speak and understand it for our own necessity and surely not to please the ego of any person or any alien nation, just as we lend ourselves spontaneously to the influences of science, modern technology, medical aids and treatment etc as naturally as we put on shirts, have a refreshing sip of cold drinks in summer and tea in all seasons, listen to radio, tape-recorder, mike, enjoy television etc. day to day without the

least hesitation for their foreign origin. These are as natural as leaves and flowers to a tree. In other words, they have become a part of our nature, civilisation and therefore inseparable from life because of the narrowing down of distances and wide contacts of different peoples of the world on one common platform for mutual benefits, for our own necessities in particular.

If we look to the history of many of the countries we will find that at the initial stage they had to depend upon some foreign languages of some foreign countries which were highly developed in science and other subjects. There was a time when Rome and Greece were great countries by virtue of their supremacy in arts and sciences and their languages, Latin and Greek, were then repository of learning and culture. Many countries, even England, learnt these languages with great zeal and earnestness.

There is no denying the fact that England owes much to these languages for her subsequent supremacy in the world and the richness of her language.

We may also recall here the glorious days of Islam when Muslims became the torch bearers of learning and civilisation to the whole of Europe and Asia. This dissemination of learning was possible through the medium of Arabic in which books of science, medicine, astrology etc. were then available. The presence of quite a large number of Arabic derivative words in English and other European languages bears testimony to this. Of course, today Arabic cannot claim the same position as it had in the medieval age. For the greatness of a language depends upon the intellectual greatness and creative genius of a nation or a people. The Arabs could not keep up their standard and supremacy they set up by intellectual pursuit for years. And in course of time they fell from their lofty position and yielded place to the Europeans.

The English soon far surpassed the Arabs and acquired a position of greatness by virtue of their discovery and inventions in different fields of knowledge for which they are indebted to the Arabs to a great extent. And their language has now become a world language of science and technology, law and jurisprudence. It is truism to say that educated people all over the world know something of English. Even in Russia, Japan, China, France and in many other countries it is

taught as a foreign language. It is astonishing to learn that in Russia more than half of the school children learn this language as a compulsory subject. It is the mother tongue of about fifty crores of people spread all over the world.

Why does English command such an enviable position in the world so that both the friends and foes of Great Britain, America, Australia—the major English speaking countries—learn it so enthusiastically? The answer is: it is profitable, immensely rewarding to have a knowledge of English as it is, above all, rightly regarded as the open sesame to upto date knowledge and information about science and arts—about all those faculties that go to make a complete man. Even the minimum number of books of science and technology to make a student quality in higher studies, are not available in Bengali yet. While translations make a small, slow progress for obvious reason, contribution to books of science and technology etc. make headway by geometrical progression. Translation cannot and perhaps never can, keep pace with day-to-day contribution of thoughts in the world of science and technology published invariably in forcing languages, specially English.

The need for communication with the outside world is now the highest than ever before. The world today has come closer and closer as the days of isolation have receded further and further through frequent contact between peoples of different countries and exchange of ideas.

We often need to go outside for acquisition of knowledge of science and technology as advanced students, for representing ourselves at the U.N.O. and the international conferences and for service in foreign lands under foreign employers amongst foreign colleagues. Hardly a day passes by when foreign dignitaries from outside do not visit our country and persons from our country do not go abroad on diplomatic, commercial, economic, cultural, educational and various other missions. And in all these cases we find a workable knowledge of an international language indispensable. And in our case this is English for historical reasons and for its richness, variety, wide popularity its long association with science and technology, law and jurisprudence, trade and commerce and for many other reasons told and retold by the educationists on many occasions.

A comparative study of the languages will certainly put English to an advantageous position. Russian will do only in Russia, German in Germany, French in France and a small part of Canada, Japanese only in Japan and Chinese only in China. But, on the other hand, English will have a smooth sailing in almost all the countries in the world. In other words, as it has been repeatedly told, English has acquired an international status of a very conspicuous nature for the main reason, besides many others, that the English had colonies spread nearly all over the world where English was learnt to their benefit.

Effective Teaching

In the face of all these facts enumerated above, it does not augur well to knock off English outright from the syllabus as a compulsory subject. We should rather retain it and put our heads together to find out ways and means to make its teaching more effective by the introduction of the latest methods of teaching, audio-visual aids etc. by engaging a sufficient number of qualified teachers and by marking the courses of studies, for the time being, much easier than before with particular emphasis on the functional aspect of the language as a means of communication right from the school level.

Honours Course of English must be introduced in more and more colleges so as to turn out teachers of English year to year to fill in the lamentable shortage of teachers in the subject at the educational institutions. With the rise in the number of teachers it will be possible to pay individual attention to students and take an adequate number of tutorial classes to meet their deficiencies.

What lungs and breath are to a life, English is to living developing nation, nay, the nations of the world at large for reasons enumerated above in a nutshell. The idea of reintroducing English in our country as a compulsory subject right from primary to intermediate classes and as optional in Degree classes of faculties is quite in the fitness of things and exigencies of time.

Provisions for Honours teaching of English should be available in many more colleges besides universities. And sufficient care should be taken to make its teaching really meaningful. It should also remain as an optional course language both in writing and speeches as before.