

The practice and application of English as a medium of instruction in the educational apparatus of our country has been a controversial issue for decades, especially so since our independence in 1971. The self-professed patriots have all along claimed that a foreign and alien language can never be the basis of our education, suppressing and supplanting our very own Bangla. The pragmatists on the other hand have placed emphasis on the historical indispensability of the English Language in our society. Instead of an overnight conversion into Bangla they have emphasized a gradual transformation with simultaneous strengthening of the base of Bangla in terms of textbooks, teachers and institutions. This duality in approach has in fact torn apart our education arena for the past two decades culminating in an alarming deterioration in the standard of our education.

Let us then dispassionately analyze the issue, retrace our history, and look at the historical facts. In ancient times this Bengal of ours had a culture of its own bred on its own resources and indigenous tradition. The foundation of our education and culture had an indigenous base and the intellectual elites of the outside world including the Greeks, the Egyptians and the Romans were awe-struck by the intellectual eminence of the Indian academicians. Came the Aryans, the Muslims, the Europeans and the English. The foundation of our indigenous culture and education crumbled and there started the process of blending of diverse cultures. Slowly but gradually our roots were lost and as the British crown extended its domination over the subcontinent, the English language and the system of education it represented got a firm foothold in India. It was not mere months, years, or decades.

Is English indispensable for our education?

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with Helaluddin Ahmed

For almost 200 years this sub-continent had remained under the shackles of a British Master. This has resulted in the inevitable consolidation of a system of education based on the English language. There was another outcome, a syndrome of dependency which spread across the subcontinent from the Khyber to the river Naf, and made us an unwitting accomplice to a language, foreign, but indispensable for our education even today. Let us now proceed with the second phase of our analysis which will entail an assessment of standard of our education during pre-liberation and post-liberation days.

Prior to 1971 the standard of our education and the degrees that it offered were widely accepted by the English speaking world which included countries like the UK or the USA. What happened was that, in continuation of our colonial tradition our pupils were bred with a diet of English from the very primary stage and this continued upto the college or university level. The standard had to be good because the base of English in terms of books, teachers and institutions were excellent and the options for selection were vast and varied.

Now, what happened after independence was that, we were thrust with a political decision all of a sudden demanding that

English be replaced by Bangla at all levels and all spheres. No experts were consulted and no expert opinions were sought. It was a hasty and foolhardy decision, trying to do something before doing the necessary ground work. What resulted was the mess in which we are in. Today, in place of an English-based high-quality educational system we live in a society of Banglaish scholars. Officially Bangla is the medium of education, unofficially the base still remains English. Weak attempts had been made to expand the base of Bangla with new text books, but these are mostly low quality ones and themselves differ with each other in respect of language, terminology, and content. The choice is limited and the quality is very poor. This prompts pupils to look for English text books, but because of their weak foundation in English at Primary, and Secondary levels, they fail to digest English at higher levels. This duality of languages in our education system results in what we may call the Banglaish syndrome.

The syndrome may be defined as neither good in Bangla, nor in English. The outcome is horrifying. The standard of our education, the standing of its degrees, and the quality of its scholars are now possibly the worst this century. This is amply manifested at

the national level in various public examinations, and on the international front at various foreign universities or US administered aptitude tests such as GRE, GMAT. GMAT is a test for Management students, and a survey of the performance IBA (DU) teachers in this particular test would reveal that it ranged mostly between 400, to 500, an abysmally poor record indeed for Management teachers. Similarly, I can quote from one of our distinguished Bangla Ph. D. scholar who insisted in a forum that our Gross National Product was 2.4. It is unthinkable that a Ph.D. Scholar does not know even the rudiments of Economics. Spurred on by the belief that our own language will facilitate easy passage through various echelons of education, today thousands and lakhs of pupils venture into the corridors of higher education only to perish, or come out successful at the expense of quality. Quantity, not quality seems to be the catchword of our education system today.

All these flops and failures of our educational arena had a devastating impact on our national and international standings. The English speaking world has in many cases withdrawn the recognition of our degrees. The Americans are so suspicious about our credibility that our stu-

dents now need passports to appear at a TOEFL Exam, possibly the only country in the world requiring such a credential. Only in Medicine and Engineering, where the medium of education is still English, do we have recognition from countries like the UK or the USA.

So we see that this Banglaish experiment had been a complete failure. To raise our standard of education what we need to do at the moment is continue our English tradition by making it mandatory at all levels. The base of Bangla in education as indicated by Textbooks, teachers and institutions, is still very poor. We do not have abundant or exhaustive, quality text books in Bangla. Our teachers, mostly brought up in the English or Banglaish tradition are not yet fully capable of converting themselves into full-fledged Bangla medium teachers. The educational institutions, earlier developed on an English base, and having an English base, suffer from a crisis of identity. The students themselves are beset with a severe Banglaish syndrome. All these had led to a downward trend in the overall standard of our education. So the only option at the moment to reverse this trend is to make English a language of instruction and learning at all levels. At least for the short term

future we must adopt and accept this reality. No doubt, our fond hope and cherished desire is to establish Bangla at all levels, but this can not be done overnight or through any hasty miscalculated decision. We must do necessary groundwork in terms of books, teachers, and institutions before Bangla can actually be made the only medium of instruction.

In this context we can cast our eyes on the Indian Model. The base of their indigenous languages in India is possibly amongst the strongest in the world, but even then they have kept to their past tradition and has continued to apply English as the medium of instruction at all levels. They don't lose by that in any way, nor do their languages or culture suffer. The quality of Indian academicians and cultural performers are acclaimed world wide.

We can also look at other continents of the globe for solace and direction. The Western world, the Europeans, or the Americans teach or learn at least one foreign language in their schools and this definitely places them in good stead in academic attainments. This leads to another related but vitally important dimension of the issue. It is now well established fact that multilingual intelligence and multilingual education is superior than monolingual ones. If we look at the developed western world where the normal practice is the mastery of at least two to three languages, we can see the truth and utility of this proposition. So why not we, a lesser developed country of the world, give recognition to our historical realities and the reality that surrounds us globally, and continue our past practice of using English as a language of instruction side by side with strengthening the base of our very own Bangla.