

Dhaka Thursday, August 18, 1988

Second language

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The love for our language is deeply imbedded in us. This is because of the sacrifices we had to make to establish our mother tongue in its due place of honour. It is often said no other people had to suffer or sacrifice so much for their language. The crusade for the language had opened up, in turn, the path for the glorious journey to nationhood. And that made our attachment to the language deeper still.

Nevertheless in this shrinking world with constantly expanding contacts we feel, like most other nations of the world, the necessity of knowledge of languages other than our own. We cannot, however, go for many. We have to choose one and the one that serves most of the purpose. We may call that language the second language of the nation. We have really reached a stage where delay in the decision would harm our national interest. Against this backdrop President Ershad's observation at Rangpur on Tuesday that time had come when all should think of studying English as a compulsory subject in educational institutions is very significant.

Our choice for second language would obviously be English. We have already some grounding in English and the language maintains its place in the member-states of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). English is also the most widely used language in the world, the spread being from Australia in south east to Canada in the north west. There are some 300 million native speakers of English and almost an equal number speak the language quite fluently. This is also the most used one among the official languages of the United Nations. We would thus stand to benefit by accepting English as our second language. It would also be in conformity with the world trend. Japan in the far east is already laying stress on learning English. Despite Chinese being one of the official languages of the United Nations China too is showing interest in English.

On the contrary in our country we find English gradually relegated into the background. Though English continues to be the medium of instruction for technical subjects and higher education, the teaching of the language has lately been weak due apparently to lack of patronage. It has also been dropped in recent years from the curricula of degree classes.

The trend has to be reversed if we want easy access to technical and higher education, improve contacts with the outside world and increase our competitiveness in the international job market. We should comprehend the advantages of having English as the second language. This would be a pragmatic step. It would not in anyway compromise the supreme position of Bangla in our national life.