

A Break from Writing; Democracy at Work in Britain; Support for Sylhet Development Council

THIS column had been in a state of suspended animation for months, giving its writer an odd feeling of being under-employed, lazy and, what's worse, devoid of any ideas worth writing about. Of course, once in a while, I would get that nervous premonition that Arthur Koestler put so well that once you stop writing for any length of time, you may either lose the desire to write again or rediscover that the joy of reading far exceeds what one might call the ordeal of writing.

Years before he wrote his best-seller "Deshe Bideshe", the late Syed Mujtaba Ali used to tell his nephews and nieces that he saw absolutely no point in writing some mediocre stuff for some non-existent readers when he could gain so much more by delving into the world of literature that one could only scratch in one life-time. Why Dr Ali eventually succumbed to the pressure from these youngsters to take to serious writing, produced "Deshe Bideshe" and dedicated it to the memory of one of his favourite nieces is another story, worth saving for another day.

During our university days, we were told that Prof. Abdur Razzak, one of the best-known intellectuals of our time, once gave the same reason why he preferred reading to writing. Maybe his aversion to writing went a bit too far, since, according to one of his many admirers, our national professor just did not feel like completing the thesis for his doctorate. He was just too busy reading!

So, when I stopped writing this column for months, I took the liberty of assuming that I now belonged to a distinguished company. The problem was, due to a serious eye trouble I had developed quite suddenly, I could not do much reading either.

Now, having regained what my doctors in Bangkok call my

normal eyesight, I am catching up with all the reading I have missed for weeks. A cynical colleague says that I have not missed much except, he quickly adds, the four-page coverage of the "Media Round Table" on the economy of Bangladesh, a Star Special, published by this paper last month.

for granted. This was democracy within a party at work, a party that has an excellent chance of taking power after the next polls.

It so happened that Bangladesh Opposition Leader, Sheikh Hasina was then in London, staying in the apartment of an Awami League leader, sorting out differences

came the debate. It was again democracy at work, this time, within the ruling party. I know, the High Commissioner for Bangladesh in the United Kingdom, Rezauul Karim attended both the annual conferences, like so many other diplomats based in London. What did he exactly report to Dhaka? Anything along the

centrating on the top leaders, it talked to people who, without making headlines in the press, remain part of the 'think tank' for their respective organisations. For instance, one morning, BBC talked to Tony Benn, the radical Labour leader who, a few years ago, nearly captured the leadership of the party. One

the late Nye Bevan who, too, lost out in the leadership of the party in the fifties but remained an asset for the organisation, until he died, somewhat prematurely, of ill health.

It is worth mentioning here that among all the British leaders, Bevan was the one most sympathetic to the democratic aspirations of the

London, in a semi political exile, when the stage was being set for in Pakistan the imposition of martial law by General Ayub Khan.

Discovery of India" and whose owner turned out to be a low-key supporter of BNP. We had quite a few meals at this restaurant and discussed the political situation in Bangladesh. The owner, Mr Bari, asked me good questions.

In keeping with the non-partisan character of The Daily Star, I provided him with a fairly balanced picture, apportioning blame between the ruling party and the opposition as equitably as possible and, in the end, finding quite a few good things to say about both.

MY WORLD

S.M. Ali

LOOKING back, I see a few positive sides to what was for me a negative, almost a frustrating, situation.

In London, I was glued to the hotel television — which was not too good for my eyes — watching the BBC coverage of the Labour Party Conference. To someone from Bangladesh whose perception of the democratic process has suffered a few jolts during past one year, it was refreshing to see how the leading opposition party in Britain conducted its own debate on issues ranging from education to defence, from immigration to European integration. The debate produced a set of divergent views which eventually provided the framework for the manifesto of the Labour Party for the next general election. No one bowed to the wishes of Neil Kinnock, but all treated him with due respect and consideration. On his part, Mr Kinnock did not take anyone

among various factions of her party in the British capital. I wondered if she had the time to watch the TV coverage of the Labour Party conference and see for herself how the opposition — or the "alternative government" as one can call it — prepare itself to face the electorate with a well-defined detailed alternative programme. And it is a programme that is worked out not behind closed doors, but on an open forum, under the glare of television cameras.

This was indeed democracy at work, with all its thrust and drive, involving the leadership and the rank and file, not a soulless ritual of rubber stamping pre-arranged decisions based on expediency.

Two days later, the TV cameras turned to the annual conference of the Conservative Party. We watched and listened to what I thought was a superb exposition of the British external policy by the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd. Then



An exuberant Neil Kinnock is applauded by Roy Hattersley after delivering speech to the Labour conference.

lines as to what lessons we can draw about the working of parliamentary democracy?

As expected BBC covered the two conferences with skill, objectivity and personalised light touches which, at times, offer the electronic media some definite advantages over newspapers. Instead of con-

question put to the Labour leader was something to this effect: "Do you see any future for socialism in Britain?" After a short pause, Benn replied, "Every generation rediscovers socialism to suit its own needs." It was the kind of answer we would have got from another radical Labour leader,

people of Pakistan, even as early as in the mid-fifties, but extremely doubtful if the people of erstwhile East Pakistan could accept the rule from Islamabad for long. He expressed these views to none other than the late Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani who spent a few months in

There was no sign of any fire anywhere, not even a burning cigarette end on a bedside table.

Then, we heard the bell captain say, "We wish Mr Sherlock Holmes was here to find out what happened!"

Well, quite an appropriate remark.

The place where we stayed was "Hotel Sherlock Holmes", located on the Baker Street.

It was with the help of this bell captain who, believe it or not, turned out to be a man from Maulvi Bazar, that we got the direction to the nearest Bangladeshi restaurant which was inaptly called "The

But, for reasons I could not understand, he also showed a quiet interest in buying a tea garden in Sylhet.

Maybe it is a status symbol, a weekend retreat and probably a sound investment, all rolled into one.

On the day we left London, Babul, Mr Bari's son, walked with us to our hotel after our lunch in their restaurant.

Then, with a quite a few people in the lobby watching us, the young man bent down and touched my feet and then of my wife, and asked for our blessings.

Who says that all second generation Bangladeshi-born Britons have lost their old ways?

If some have, Babul is not certainly one of them.

The Thread That Ties : A Journey Into the World of English

by Kaiser Zaman

ALTHOUGH it set in the British Empire long ago, the sun never sets in the English-speaking world of today. From Papua New Guinea in the outer fringes of Asia to tiny Belize tucked away in South America, the elite and not-so-elite speak English as their mother tongue, and even if their mothers didn't they at least speak English with their children. Even when they think, they think in English.

There are perhaps more people in the Indian Subcontinent who lose their temper in English than there are people in all of Canada or Australia. There must be more than half a billion people (counting the American way) who speak, write, fight, think, dream — and do whatever else one does to express ideas and emotions in a linguistic form — in English. Some of the best-known writers in English learned it as a second language: Timothy Mo, Roald Dahl and Joseph Conrad, to name a few.

Despite the difficulty of writing fiction in a language other than the native language of the characters, there are many others who are creating English language literature in their own countries.

It isn't only in England or in the new colonies where the Englishmen settled, but in dozens of other countries where they went to rule. In country after country, the Union Jack was lowered and taken home but the language was left behind. The English language got away from the seafaring English people. It is no longer theirs alone. I exist in countless forms in countless regions all over the world. Add to that creole or pidgin or Franglais (French-English) or Taglish (Tagalog-English), an it is the whole world! They speak English in so many different ways, who's to say who's right and who's wrong.

I had been intrigued the idiosyncracies of the English tongue ever since I learned the language as a child. Little did I know how much more bewildering it would get as I travelled and lived in countries where English is widely used. It has been a fascinating, frustrating journey so far. Over time, I have lost my linguistic centre of gravity. I find myself picking up the syntax and accent of wherever I am. In India, I speak English with the prevalent Indian-English accent.

In Thailand, I subconsciously imitate the tonal accent of the Thais. In North America, they tell me that I have a British accent. A Washington wordsmith once said that I think Thai. When I

am in London, I sometimes wonder if the language I was taught in school and which I heard on the BBC wasn't actually an elaborate sham, and real English is what the London taxi driver speaks which, needless to say, I hardly understand.

I overcame the hurdle of understanding American English fairly easily. John Wayne wasn't reduced to speaking in Bangali in the movies, although he speaks fluent Thai in neighbouring Thailand. Even so, I find that I could benefit greatly if I had the services of an English-to-English interpreter when I speak to certain Americans

Take heart, all you non-native English speakers who feel that you can never speak good English. Even the English can't, according to Prof. Henry Higgins.

who have not fully melted in the melting pot. I certainly could have used one when I went to see a play in Kingston, Jamaica. It was a fast-paced political satire in Jamaican English.

I understood about a quarter of the words and about a tenth of what was said. The rest of the time, I was frustrated but to be a good sport, I mimicked the audience reaction like an idiot. The playhouse English was very different from the impeccable English of the Jamaican diplomats in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Reminded me of Upstairs and Downstairs.

Mercifully, I found it easier to understand East African English, although some phrases left me off-balance. In arid Somalia where water shortage is a chronic problem, they promised to send the "boozie" to my house which, to my relief, turned out to be a water bowser. In Kenya, swallowing dry coffee did not irritate my throat since all it meant is that I drank my coffee without milk or sugar.

Kenyan English can be as tasty as its coffee. A world class Kenyan snob will speak with his compatriots in Swahili, but will make it abundantly clear that he is equally at ease in English. But the foreigner who speaks only English, he is the one who pays the premium.

Even a rudimentary knowledge of English enables the locals to separate the tourist from his

money in a thousand different ways. I used my limited Swahili vocabulary to pretend that I was a local resident who simply preferred to speak in English. They probably thought that I was suffering from reverse snobbery but it worked. I did not have to pay tourist prices for everyday things.

But for the English language, the second largest country in the world, India, would have been truly a sub-continent with as many countries as in Europe. English is the *primus inter pares* among India's eighteen languages and two hundred dialects. The blending of colonial English with local curry has given Indian English a delectable flavor. Thus, an Indian sees no reason why if a scheduled event can be postponed, it cannot be "preponed". Not every Indian, though, is so bold. In the far reaches of the old British Empire are countless clerks who remain faithful to the formality of the Raj and always end their official letters with the phrase "Your obedient servant" or "y.o.s." in short. English teachers write text books, proudly putting "B A (plucked)" after their names. Failure may yet bring success if it is packaged with audacity. An Anglo-Indian friend of mine who spoke only English, pointing to a mango tree in the neighbour's house, said excitedly "Look look, little little mangoes are catching on the tree!" Compare that with this sentence from a prominent linguist of Indian English, Braj Kachru: "The most important role of English, however, is to provide a code of communication to linguistically and culturally diverse groups for interpersonal communication." I wonder how my friend would have said the same thing in his refreshing style of "interpersonal communication." Another friend who has been living in the United States for nearly thirty years, bought a pair of shoes which were too tight for him. They hurt his "foot fingers", he complained.

Colonial English is perhaps best preserved in Burma of old, the hermit country where anything which is not officially sanctioned (such as learning English) succeeds better than whatever the Bogok thinks is good for the country. The nineteenth century colonial, T B Macaulay, an ardent advocate of English in "The Jewel in the Crown" (also known as India) would have been pleased to know that the Burmese have remained loyal to Fowler's Modern English Usage and Nesfield's grammar. The Malays, on the other hand, successfully got rid of colonial English, only to find that they have an entrenched local variety. The English of multiracial Malaysia and Singapore is as

distinctive as the Singapore Sling which is served in the Raffles Hotel. Every sentence ends with a "la" for emphasis, as in "Yes-la, can!" or "No-la, cannot!" If a Malaysian asks if he could follow you and you say yes, don't think he has changed his mind if you drive off and don't see his car following you. Because you left behind a perplexed individual who had asked you for a lift. The Indonesians in the former Dutch colony are fairly content to forget their Dutch legacy, co-opt English words into their own Bahasa (language) and leave it at that. ("I-fication", as I call it: take out the ending of a word and add an "i" and voila! "confrontation" in English becomes "confrontation" in Indonesian.) Perhaps the reason is that the Indonesians are caught between what the Australians say is English and what they hear from others. The Balinese know better than to ask an Australian when he arrived in Denpasar, for the chances are that instead of answering that question, the Australian is going to confide that he has come to beautiful Bali to commit suicide. "I've come to die" is what the uninitiated car would hear when the Australian actually said "I've come today."

I could go on. The point is, over the years, I have picked up words, idioms, syntax grammar, and colloquialisms from so many different countries, that I am more confused today than when I was seven years old.

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Conversation

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wants to bring down the government at this stage. So, on an issue, he may find the Janata Dal voting against him, but the BJP waiting out and abstaining to save the government from falling.

DS : So you see the future of India lying in a genuine form of federalism?

MT : Yes, a genuine form of federalism. You see, in the early days, state chief ministers were great men in their own right. Men like Govind Balla Pant of UP, Pratap Singh of Punjab, they were great men in their own right and you couldn't just order them out. They very genuinely represented the interest of their states in the centre.

DS : Well, Mr. Mark Tully, thank you very much for your time.

To begin with, this school of engineering and its museum are housed in the former abbey of Saint-Martin-in-the-Fields. Although it was restored in the 18th century and partly in 1930, most of the buildings date from the 12th and 13th centuries and were themselves built on the site of a church from the 7th century. One of the builders was Pierre de Montreuil, the architect of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris and of Notre-Dame. Visitors can appreciate the church, the monks' refectory and the priory.

In 1794, a decision by the Convention allocated the buildings for a National Technical Museum (Musée National des Arts et Metiers). Thus, the 10th October 1794 saw the creation of "a public depository for machines, models tools, drawings, description and books concerning all kinds of techniques". The museum started with J Vaucanson's collection of works having belonged to the Royal Academy of Science and objects from the Crown Furniture Depository. It was set up from 1798. Since then it has been continually enriched by thousands of items from donations, bequests and acquisitions in all kinds of ar-

300 Years of Inventions

If you are interested in modern technology or "high-tech", then you should visit the Cite des Sciences at La Villette in Paris. But, if you want to find out about the development of Science and Techniques over the last 300 years, and the history of what has become our everyday world and everyday life, then you should go to the "Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers". You will be dazzled.

cas such as agriculture, printing, clock-making, physics, chemistry, mechanics, energy, astronomy, glass-making, photography, electricity, telecommunications, cars, aircraft, railways, etc. As is often the case, there is only room to present a small part of the museum's collections.

The entrance to the museum leads directly to the former church. There are old cars: Cugnot's famous "Fardier" which is the first automobile. It was driven by steam and dates from 1765. Then there are vehicles by the Bollee brothers, the "Mancelle" and the "Obicssante", also driven by steam and dating from between 1877-1885, as well as others by Benz, Panhard, Serpollet, etc. From the vaults hangs Bleriot's "Antoinette" (1909), a Breguet from 1910 and Clement Ader's "Avion"

(1893). Around the edge, there is an incredible collection of bicycles and other two wheeled vehicles including the first motorcycle built by Millot in 1878. The whole of the nave is taken up by a no less incredible collection of internal combustion engines where one can see that the V8 and the star-shaped engine date from the end of last century. They surround Foucault's famous pendulum which has been swinging since 1852. And all that is just in the entrance to the museum.

Priceless collections
It would be quite impossible to list all the collections in the forty rooms or so, but here are a few of the most striking exhibits.

In the area of clock-making and precision instruments, there is a large number of

time-pieces signed by Berthoud, Breguet, Laepaute and Janvier, astronomical instruments, Rheinhold's sphere (16th century) and an extraordinary collection of precision tools. There is also the magnificent rose engine which belonged to Louis XVI and is a marvel of technology. Further on there are automatons including Kintzing's dulcimer (1780).

The whole development, of agricultural implements and public works equipment is also presented. Telecommunications (Baudot and Morse's telegraph, Ericsson and Ader's telephone, etc) the beginnings of the wireless (Branly's "iron-filings coherer" the triode lamp, the first transmitter on the Eiffel Tower...), X-ray tubes, cathode-ray tubes and the early stages of television. — Jean Chabrier

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

Whatever you say, the bottom line in that women have to make all the adjustment to make a marriage work. My husband is kind, even tempered, provides well for the family and we have a reasonably good marriage. But I wonder if it would be so if I refused to adjust or comply to his demands. For example he has not allowed me to have any other career except that of a school teacher, he wants me to teach the children and even if we have servants, I should look the main meal. All these years I have complied with these demands, but, what if I had refused? What do you have to say to this?

Amira, Chittagong.

Dear Amira,

You have made a good point, this question is being asked by many married women especially those who believe in asked by many the traditional as well as the modern concept of marriage. Of all the demands made by your husband, not letting you pursue a career of your choice is the most serious one. There are many husbands who insist on little things such as the tea must be made and served by the wife, or that she should come to the door to greet him or wish him good bye etc. but when it comes to serious things like encouraging her to go abroad and study these same husbands have known to demonstrate a tremendous understanding. Marriage should essentially be a bond. It is not necessary to fight for every little cause but women should draw the line when her identity is threatened.

Dear Mita,

Your solution to problems are really good. I like to appreciate so here I am asking you for a solution. My mother-in-law is always talking about me to my other sister-in-law behind my back and again she is talking about my sister-in-law behind her back. She is very sweet with me in front of her son. My elder sister-in-law advises me to reply back but I am totally of different nature. My sister-in-law does so and so she advises me to the same I cannot even complain to my husband but my life is becoming miserable. Now, you tell me or suggest me what should I do to change this kind of attitude of my mother-in-law?

Baby, Dhanmondi.

Dear Baby,

I am afraid there is not much you can do about your problem except to suffer in silence or have a confrontation with your mother-in-law. Let her know that you are aware of

her behavior and would prefer her to stop it. I realize this is hard to do. But the other alternative is if she does not live with you than just ignore it. What about your sister-in-law? Is there any chance that she might be adding fuel to the fire?

Dear Mita,

My son is 10 and has not been promoted to the next class. My husband thinks it is my fault, that I did not teach him well. We are having big arguments about this as I really resent his attitude. Not for a day did he try to teach him and now has the nerve to blame me. Our son has always been a weak student but is otherwise quite intelligent, what should I do, is changing school a solution? please advise.

Rina, Dhaka.

Dear Rina,

Our school system is such that even a child of 9 has to understand the meaning of failure at this young age. It is a system which is geared towards the above average student, the rest fall between the cracks and are forgotten. Changing school could be a short term solution but you would face the same frustrations in the long run. The child needs constant supervision from both the parents along with love and care that I am sure you give him. He must be encouraged to do better next time and in no way his self esteem should be made to suffer.

Dear Mita,

Long time ago you wrote to a woman who had a dark complexioned daughter. I don't know if your letter helped her or not but I have tried everything and still society treats my daughter as if she was disabled because she is very dark. What can I do to build her confidence? She is only 13 and is a very good student, but is getting a complex. I am afraid she will have lots of problems in life.

Rahat, Narayanganj.

Dear Rahat,

Your daughter will have no problem in life as long as you, your husband, her family makes her feel special. Each child is precious in their own way and should be treated as such. It is most unfortunate that in this age and time, when we are soon going to be citizens of the 21st century, something as ridiculous and insignificant as the colour of the skin should determine a child's personality. Just let her grow normally, give her your love, support and a secure home, and ignore some ignorant peoples comments.