

Its Declining Standard is a Loss, in Material Terms

More Facilities for Kidney Treatment Needed

The spread of kidney disease, according to reports, is quite alarming. But still more disconcerting is the failure of our medicare system to adequately deal with the acute ailment claiming as high as 94 lives per 100 patients, all of whom being children between the ages of one and five. The sudden spurt in the prevalence of the disease is somewhat bewildering but not completely unexpected. In the medical world, some diseases sometimes break out quite bafflingly, proving the existing facilities for treatment much too inadequate. But that does not mean no more efforts have to be made to cope with the unusual situation. However, it has now been months that the authorities concerned are least bothered about the fate of the increasing number of children falling victims to this particular type of kidney disease called acute renal failure (ARF). Only last month no less than 500 child patients seeking treatment were refused admission to the two hospitals — Post Graduate (PG) Hospital and Shishu Hospital — with facilities for peritoneal dialysis (PD) required to be done every 48 hours for the disease.

Why were the patients turned down? When the lives of the children are on the brink, nobody in his right senses can refuse them treatment available. But the fact that the two hospitals have together only 12 beds explains why patients coming from far-flung areas of the country have to go back without treatment. Any disease breaking out in epidemic form calls for emergency measures. The current high incidence of the disease may not have crossed the mark medically determined as epidemic, but its extremely high mortality rate ought to point to the need for immediate administrative action. The helplessness of both the doctors and the patients owing mostly to the lack of medical facilities cannot be accepted with Buddhist resignation, less so when the facilities are not prohibitively costly and forbiddingly maintenance-minded.

Quite revealingly, the disease — according to surveys — is mostly prevalent among children of poor families in which the mothers' ignorance plays a contributory role in the ARF. That the patients are also reporting from all corners of the country points to the fact that the facility has to be spread to the thana level if the cure for the disease is to be made available to the target people. This certainly looks to be too ambitious a proposal to be implemented soon. What, however, stands a realistic chance is equipping the district hospitals with the necessary machines for treatment of this terrible disease. The sooner such equipment can be procured, the better. In the meantime, the existing capacities of the city's two hospitals should be raised to a level, matching the rush of the patients.

Developments in the treatment area are, on the contrary, disconcerting. The picture of a packet of kidney dialysis solution, published in this daily yesterday, confirms the assertion. Full of dirt, the packet was manufactured by the Institute of Public Health, Mohakhali and, surprisingly, did not bear any batch number on it. Bags of distilled water containing algae inside and clandestine business in spurious medicines have long been in the news. Dialysis fluid bags with dirt inside is the latest addition to the long list of medical malpractices and lack of care in producing the life-saving drugs. These are crimes that deserve no amnesty whatsoever. Apart from the punitive considerations, there are even bigger and more important issues linked to it which is the lack of general health consciousness. The trend set in at the top does in no way help the cause of restoring confidence of the common mass in modern treatment. Prevention is better than cure, as an adage, sounds nice but in practice ever remains elusive to the people not rich and educated enough. The parents of the children suffering from the ARF have amply proved the point. This situation has to be changed and a possible way out may be the inclusion of a programme on the remedial measures against the kidney disease in the Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI) or family planning programme.

Tribute to Dubcek

The death of Alexander Dubcek, the leader of 1968 "Prague Spring" Reform Movement, on Saturday closes a chapter in the history of Czechoslovakia on a sad note, not to mention the sense of loss suffered by his country and freedom-loving people everywhere.

In the mid-sixties, when the rumblings in a number of East European countries were getting louder against the domination of Moscow, it was Dubcek, then heading the Czech Communist Party, who sought to reform the rigidly controlled organisation to give it something of a progressive look, if it was possible with a Communist Party, to create what was dubbed as "Socialism with a Human Face."

It was an exercise no less revolutionary than the break of Yugoslavia, under Marshal Tito, from Moscow in the late forties. Dubcek was driven by a vision that was eventually crushed when almost half a million Soviet-led troops stormed into Czechoslovakia in August, 1968 to put an end to what became known as the "Prague Spring." And then there came the Brezhnev Doctrine that, in theory, gave Kremlin the right to intervene in a neighbouring socialist country if it was faced with the so-called internal subversion against the status quo.

One redeeming feature of the Soviet invasion of Prague was that Dubcek did not end up before the firing squad. Whether he was spared because of his commitment to socialism or due to the enormous international sympathy for his role, history alone can judge. Maybe historians will find something in the Soviet archives which will solve the puzzle. But the great Czech leader went into political obscurity to mark time for another kind of Prague Spring. It was good, of his grateful country to bring the ageing leader back to limelight as the Speaker of the country's national parliament.

THAT again is important, because the argument will hinge on that. The question of English has been with us ever since we attained statehood, and, hopefully will be with us till we leave things in the care of our grandchildren. A few incidents come to mind, not entirely unrelated to the question.

The year the British left the subcontinent was also the year I entered the university as a freshman (to use an Americanism). I was making my entries in the admission form. I was about to write History in the space provided for indicating the subject for Honours when I was stopped by my father. I thought your first preference was English. History came next. And he gave a look of enquiry. But the British have left, what future is there for English? said I. 'English will be with us for thirty years, at the least,' my father said, reassuringly.

I do not say that in choosing English I made a wrong choice, but academically speaking, history held more prospects. It was too late when I realised that.

The scene now shifts to Rajshahi University, more precisely to the damp and dark hall-room in the ground floor of Barakuthi, the old pile of a Dutch building, standing precariously on the bank of the unpredictable Padma, now serving its turn as the Vice-Chancellor's residence-cum-administration office of the new university.

In keeping with the massiveness of Barakuthi, we had a long and massive table, solid Burma teak, draped in blue. And around this table the Academic Council met, to discuss weighty matters. The question of English was on the agenda. I do not remember exactly in what form the question came up. Possibly the Council was dissecting the re-

Is English making a come-back to our educational institutions as a compulsory subject? So it would seem from several recent official statements. Here, in a three-part series, under his regular feature, "Passing Clouds", our guest columnist, Prof Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, looks at the whole question from all different angles. A former Vice Chancellor of the Jahangir Nagar University, Prof Siddiqui obtained his Masters in English Language and Literature from Dhaka University and later from Oxford.

sults of a public examination in which the general students had done dismally bad in English, a compulsory subject. Some members wondered why English should still remain as a required subject at the Intermediate (HSC) level, particularly in the Science stream. Dr Qudrat-e-Khuda was among the objectors, and I had a little argument with him. He claimed himself as an exponent of Bengali, though what I remembered of him in his Presidency College days, did not lend support to this claim. I might have been wrong there since I did not know what he believed in his inmost heart. We judge by externals only.

Already English was an unpopular thing, not only among students, almost equally among teachers also. It was losing ground. Science students, if I remember correctly, got their exemption from English, at the intermediate level, on the basis of an assumption that they, being better students, had already learnt enough.

Dr Qudrat-e-Khuda, as he grew older, became more and more convinced on the question of the dispensability of English. And he had the — well deserved, I must say — distinction of having been chosen as the Chairman of the Education Commission formed in 1973. The report submitted by this Commission kept English out of the curriculum for Primary education, but made it compulsory both for SSC and HSC.

I still think that was a

sound position he took. Later governments gave a decent burial to his Report, and the cogent and co-ordinated ideas enshrined in the Report were all abandoned to make room for ideas favoured by the new leaders of the nation and faithfully put into operation by a loyal bureaucracy.

Two things happened simultaneously: an earlier start for English, at the Primary level, and an earlier departure of English, at the degree level.

Before I discuss the merit or otherwise of these chan-

English, far from being an aid to the development of Bangla, is the one factor cutting the ground under the beloved mother tongue and ruining its prospects and bringing disaster to education.

My critic does not carry the day but he has the satisfaction of having made a patriotic speech and having been cheered by the gallery.

To-day, quarter of a century later, after English has been cut to its size, not only our cities and towns are full of English coaching centres, col-

lege and university students are crowding into special courses offered by English language teachers, on and off campus. The patriotic issue of yesterday has been transformed into a bread-and-butter issue of to-day.

In the late sixties, it a small world of East Pakistan, far away from the remaining part of Pakistan, and we had no access to the employment world outside. After Bangladesh, there has been a radical change. There has been an amounting unemployment at home, and an increasing opportunity abroad, an opportunity linked up with an ability to communicate in English. This requirement holds good for the English speaking world, and to a considerable extent, for the rest of the world. All of a sudden, without any prompt-

ing from a Professor of English, or from the British Council, English is in high demand. The government, too, keen on exporting manpower, keen on having larger number of wage-earners abroad, suddenly looks at the question from a fresh angle.

Hitherto, English was treated as a sensitive issue, unavoidably linked up with the issue of Bangla. The common view was that if you wished an improvement of the one, you certainly were criminally callous about the other. This view prevailed, not only among Professors of Bangla but also many others who did not have any professional stake in the matter.

Talking of myself, I had a particular advantage — my experience and in-sight as a teacher — matched by a particular disadvantage, — my professional identity as a teacher of English, my bread-and-butter link with the language. I have learnt to be careful in making any pronouncement on the debated question of whether or not we should be concerned with something which was an indisputable fact: the steeply declining standard of English. This has been an all-pervasive phenomenon, — in education, in administration, in public life. Whatever corresponding improvement has taken place in respect of Bangla appears to have been so not because we have attached less importance to English. If more people now are stronger in Bangla, it has to be attributed to other forces, espe-

cially to the social and political compulsions. The achievement no way justifies the loss. And now, there is a widespread realisation that the declining standard of English is a loss, and most obviously in material terms.

The signal has come mostly from the world of business and of administration. But we have been receiving it from the academic world for quite some time. Our scholars have been facing difficulties abroad, in pursuing higher studies. And our products have been proving below expectations by employers. The message was clear enough, and this pointed to a malaise not confined to English teaching and learning as such. In fact it pointed to a general decline in our education. And in recent years, it has served as the best argument in favour of private universities.

The government's concern finds expression in several ways. It has, by passing the private universities bill, cleared the path for the establishment of such universities, so long the exclusive privilege of the government. And further, very recently, it has announced that a change in the degree level curriculum, providing for English as a compulsory subject, is under the active consideration of the government. Already, a retired professor of Bangla, has questioned the move in rather strong language, pronouncing it as retrogressive and anti-Bangla. In what I am going to say now may appear to be in support of Dr Nileema Ibrahim's stand but I hope it will be seen that I oppose the proposal not because I share her fears, but because I consider that the governments perception is both muddled-headed and ill-conceived. What is more, it may, if the idea is translated into action, prove to be counterproductive.

Part-II tomorrow.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

ges, I move to the next scene.

The time is somewhere between 1966 and 1968 and the place is the Jinnah (now Sher-e-Bangla) Hall auditorium of Rajshahi University. I am presenting a paper, The Future of English, written in Bangla, and I am addressing the faculty of the university. I am giving my reaction to a current wave of opinion, clamouring for a more decisive rejection of English. I do my best to argue that a continued contact with English will serve the cause of Bangla best, as already proved by the history of the development of our language.

When listeners have their turn to comment on the paper, I am the target of a vicious attack by a colleague, a Professor of Bangla, who sees nothing but an evil design in my argument. In his eyes,

leg and university students are crowding into special courses offered by English language teachers, on and off campus. The patriotic issue of yesterday has been transformed into a bread-and-butter issue of to-day.

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ing from a Professor of English, or from the British Council, English is in high demand. The government, too, keen on exporting manpower, keen on having larger number of wage-earners abroad, suddenly looks at the question from a fresh angle.

How to Fight Raiders in World's Busiest Waters

Stephen Carr writes from Singapore

Piracy in Indonesian, Singaporean and Malaysian waters has reached record levels. One problem in the busy sea lanes has been that patrol boats from one country cannot pursue raiders into the territorial waters of another. An agreement between Indonesia and Singapore now allows the security forces to chase the pirates into each other's waters.



SINGAPORE and Indonesia have agreed to let naval units and marine police pursue raiders into each other's territorial waters. The pact aims to check piracy in the world's busiest waterway — the Malacca Straits.

Pirates caught by patrol boats will be dealt with by the authorities in whose waters they are arrested. The Indonesian and Singaporean navies have established direct radio links and Indonesia has set up a radio channel for merchant vessels in its waters. Last year a record 203 armed attacks took place on merchant ships in or around the Malacca Straits against 60 in 1990 and only three in 1989. The danger zone stretches from the northern tip of Sumatra, past Singapore and into the Phillips Channel, scattered with reefs and islands, where ships have to slow down and navigate carefully.

Typically, a small high speed boat draws alongside a cargo boat, usually after midnight. A gang armed with machetes climbs aboard and threatens the crew. The ship's safe is ransacked. Portable valuables like cameras binoculars and radio equipment are taken. The crew is tied up and any resistance met with violence.

Usually the raids take no more than half an hour and the average haul is worth a few thousand dollars. The gang makes off at high speed to its hiding place in one of the innumerable inlets and harbours in the nearby islands.

The London-based Inter-

national Maritime Bureau reported recently that most attacks occurred within Indonesian territorial waters. It also suggested that the Indonesian military may be involved in some raids.

Other suspicions of official collusion with the pirates have come from shipowners worried at what is the equivalent of burglary at sea. They suggest customs of officers may pass

information and that a radar surveillance unit on Batam island, near Singapore, may be the source of information on shipping movements for the pirates.

Vice Admiral Yusuf Effendi, who commands Indonesia's western fleet, denied his country was militarily involved in the attacks. He said Indonesian navy action against pirates had been successful

this year. Men from the navy had infiltrated pirate gangs to gather information on their activities. Patrols had been increased and more than 30 pirates arrested.

The increased Indonesian naval patrols since June and the "hot pursuit" policy since August seemed to be working. From June to September only four instances of piracy were reported. A total of 70 attacks have taken place so far this year.

But the problem is not yet over. In late September a Panamanian-registered oil tanker was fired upon by machine gun from a small boat. Piracy around the Malacca Straits appears to be less organised than further north in the Gulf of Thailand and off the Philippines were entire cargoes are routinely hijacked.

In a recent incident, pirates firing on a ship they were preparing to board off the Philippines found they had picked a Russian warship. It returned several rounds of naval artillery and the would-be attackers fled for their lives.

Shipping circles fear that one day a raid will do far more damage than the loss of a few thousand dollars. If a crew is incapacitated and the ship allowed to drift in a hazardous

stretch of water like the Phillips Channel, there is danger of collision or running aground.

Ecologists are worried that pirates could cause an environmental disaster if an oil tanker attacked led to a large oil spill. Petrol bombs have been used in some raids and fires started on ships by attackers. Shipowners fear the flow of goods through the Malacca Straits may be disrupted and that freight and insurance rates could go up.

These fears may be unfounded if the success of the current policing operation continues. The response to piracy is certainly becoming more organised. The International Maritime Bureau has set up an information centre in Kuala Lumpur to alert relevant authorities to sea raids when

Kong Ship Owners Association, Michael Farley, opposes the suggestion of arming the crew against pirates. Cargo vessels with firearms aboard are subject to long and costly registration procedures in port. Farley believes guns on ships lead to nothing but trouble.

"Supposing you did shoot somebody and kill them. What do you do then? Take their body to the next port where you risk a long delay and investigation? No, the carrying of arms aboard merchant ships is just not on."

Ships' captains and crews on the 700 vessels that sail the Malacca Straits each week must hope that the new anti-piracy measures are enough to protect them. — Gemini News

STEPHEN CARR is a freelance journalist who is now based in Bandung, Indonesia.

OPINION

LDCs

According to UN criteria (such as per capita income, rate of literacy and the extent of industrialisation), Bangladesh has been designated as one of the Least Developed Countries. Because of relatively large size of population and wide international contacts, Bangladesh is the natural leader of the group which now comprises 41 countries. In fact, Dhaka has been playing an important role in various international forums in promoting the cause of this category of countries. It is presumably because of its initiative, an international research centre is scheduled to be established soon in Dhaka under the UN auspices to monitor the development activities and the future action plan of the Least Developed Countries.

In this context, I would like to draw the attention of our government, the media as well as the UN to the urgent need for removing a long-standing misgiving which has been undermining the determination of this poorest group of countries. The misgiving is due to the group's popular acronym which is also used in UN literature. In fact, the acronym LDCs is ambiguous. It connotes two different concepts: Less Developed Countries (Developing Countries) and Least Developed Countries. The number of the former category of countries is at least three times more than the latter. All Least Developed Countries are less developed but not vice versa. The distinction is important because much against the wishes of many of the other Less Developed Countries, the Least

Developed Countries have been seeking some special concessions from the Developed Countries.

Now, if the abbreviation LDCs is used to mean both the categories of countries, this will obviously lead to confusion and misunderstanding and will be particularly detrimental to the interests of the Least Developed Countries. It is all the more unfortunate that in Bangladesh the Bengali expression used in the media for Least Developed Countries, even when this is clearly stated, connotes less developed countries, although the Bengali word for Least (as distinct from Less) is there, this is not used.

In view of the foregoing, I would suggest that LDCs (instead of LDCs) should be the reasonably proper abbreviation for Least Developed Countries, while LDCs should mean Less Developed Countries. In fact, some authors, both at home and abroad, have already used the two separate abbreviations (so as to emphasize the word 'Least' and distinguish the two categories of countries) but these have not been popularly recognized.

I would add that abbreviations need not always be acronyms (words combining of initial letters). For instance, the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund is still known as UNICEF. I would also fervently request the people in the Bengali media to use the proper word for 'Least Developed', which should be in the superlative.

Dr Nurul Momen Professor, Department of International Relations, DU

To the Editor...

Road needs repair

Sir, The narrow road by the southern side of the 'East Rajabazar Masjid' proceeding towards West Rajabazar is an important road for the public of that locality. But the condition of this road beggars description. The road in question has developed many potholes here and there and when there is little rain, mud and water accumulates making the condition very much deplorable. There is no manhole covers at many places on the road, which makes it hazardous for the passers-by during the dark hours. The breadth of the road is so narrow at places that two rickshaws cannot cross each other side by side. During the rains, the movement of traffic becomes all the more difficult.

Persons who travel by this road are very much hard hit. There is perhaps none to look after this tragic condition of this important road. The municipal authorities realise taxes from the city dwellers at a very irritating rate, but do not seem to take any note of the inconvenience suffered by them.

I would like to draw the kind attention of the relevant authorities through the

columns of your esteemed paper with the request that they may make an inspection on emergency basis and take steps so that people's sufferings on this account may come to an end.

Kazi Imranul Haque
Purba Raja Bazar, Dhaka.

System loss in power sector

Sir, I heartily congratulate you on your thought provoking editorial under the caption 'Congratulations and Cautions' in your daily of 17th October. System loss in Bangladesh is one of the highest in the world. You have rightly stated that transmission loss may be maximum to the tune of 15 per cent and rest of the fantastic 42 per cent loss is simply theft.

Every class of consumers — domestic, commercial and industrial — are contributing to this loss. But domestic consumption of electricity is only 20 per cent. Industrial consumers account for nearly 75 per cent of consumption and their number is only a few

thousand. Meter-reading of this category is not taken by meter readers and meter inspectors but by the responsible engineers. And should one tend to believe that in connivance with these engineers industrialists are dodging around one thousand crore taka revenue every year? Given honesty and sincerity of purpose it is not at all difficult to prevent this theft. Unless top level engineers set an example, lower level engineers like Asstt Engineers, SD Es and XENs cannot do anything substantial.

Although PDB and DESA magistrates are occasionally disconnecting a few unauthorised connections, these are mostly domestic and hence can contribute very little in reducing the system loss. Unless and until unauthorised connections and underfilling of industrial consumers are dealt with an iron hand, the question of reducing the system loss will remain a far cry. Past experience in the field, however, has never been encouraging.

The ultimate answer perhaps lies in privatisation of the distribution system. This will no, doubt, vehemently be resisted for obvious reason. But

if the national economy and the poor consumers are to be saved, there seems to be no alternative.

Nuzhat Rummana
Dhaka Cantt

Congregation or Convocation

Sir, I saw a news item in the 18-10-92 issue of The Daily Star stating that the next "congregation" of ICTVTR would be held soon where Prime Minister Khaleida Zia would present Diplomas/Certificates etc to the pressed out students. Yours reporter has termed it as a 'Congregation' instead of 'Convocation' or 'Certificate-awarding ceremony'. I think the word 'Congregation' does not apply here as it is not an assembly of worshippers, rather a ceremony to reward earthly achievements. In this case, the achievements of the students of ICTVTR who have been successful in their final examinations. So, I consider the term 'Congregation' a misnomer.

K A Ahmed
Dhaka