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The Baily Star

Dhaka, Friday, October 15, 1993

Return of English

As an English language daily, we cannot but welcome any move to expand the scope and improve the quality of English education in Bangladesh. But the way we are going about it raises a few questions in our mind. There is an element of extremism and adhocism in the decision to make English compulsory upto degree level studies. Immediately after the birth of Bangladesh, we took the extreme step of banishing English from our curriculum. Two decades later, we seem to have come to the conclusion that every existing problem in education springs from the fact that we have excluded English from our studies. So now the panacea for all ills is to reintroduce English at all levels.

We believe that the real problem in education lies not in the fact that we have abandoned English, but that we have abandoned quality education as such. Forget English, do we get good students who are proficient in other subjects? There has been a general deterioration of education, which is what lies at the core of our problem in education, and must be addressed urgently. If the general poor standard of education is maintained, then we will get students with extremely poor language skills in English. So let us talk about education first, English education later.

We could not agree more with the contention that the standard of English today is lower than ever before and there is a need for its improve ment. We also want to make it a point that we will never be found wanting in the will to welcome any move aimed at raising the general standard of English in this country. Not long ago learning two or more languages was considered necessary by the students of this part of the world. Compared to other languages. English certainly offers for us more facilities and advantages -because of the two hundred years' association and its status as one of the international languages - which we should not be foolish enough to ignore.

We, however, beg to differ with remedies suggested for cure of the problem in education. It is too simplistic to say that reintroduction of English will improve the skill of students in that language. Let us admit that the standard has fallen not in English alone, but in all other subjects, including our mother tongue. Let us also agree that if the students could learn their subjects in as demanding a way as suits the standard in the vernacular, the question of improving skill in a foreign language perhaps would not look so pressing. If anything, learning a foreign language cannot but be an overriding necessity for people specialising in it or engaged in enriching the mother tongue. What is even more important is to make our own language strong enough so that it can assimilate the diverse thought processes of a most challenging time.

It is an absurd proposition to raise the standard of English without trying to improve the overall quality of education, which undoubtedly calls for a strong logistical base and a congenial atmosphere for education, on neither of which count our record is satisfactory. It is common knowledge that most schools, barring the famous ones in cities and towns, cannot even offer the minimum basic facilities such as furniture, implements; and also lacks enough qualified teachers - more so on English subject. It is because of such inherent weaknesses that the last 22 years could not deliver any goods in the area of education, much less in the learning of English. There is no mention of creating any such infrastructure for the introduction of English afresh.

We conclude by saying that we welcome the awareness that English must receive more attention in our education if we are to compete in the global marketplace. But this cannot be achieved without an overall dramatic improvement in our standard of education in general.

We appear to be jumping from the position of ignoring English education, to putting too much emphasis on it. If we have good education, only then we will have good English education. Let us never forget that.

Water Contamination at Mahamuni

The world is not only getting smaller every day, it is also growing evermore environmentconscious. It will take some time before the whole of our society, mostly illiterate and unresponsive as it is, can be moved to adapt itself to the dictates of the modern-day demands of environment-protection - and give up age-old practices that harm the balance of the ecology of an overcrowded human setting. Harder than that will be to reform our nouveau riche into eschewing their new-found life-style based wholly on waste. Judging from the protestations it makes, our government is indeed serious about this environment thing. It must be granted that some headway has been made in the sanitation and immunological campaign now in full swing under active UNICEF inspiration. And the government also has only this week decided to ban polythene bags expressly because of environmental reasons.

The question is how can this same government manage not to care about certain of its projects bringing devastation to environment. As a very bad example of this the Rauzan thermal power station, generating a hefty 210 megawatts, is right at this moment polluting its surrounding croplands and fish farms and milieu in general with the rivers of contaminated waste water that issue from the plant. Unchecked the effluent water can contaminate all natural springs and manmade reservoirs of waters such as ponds and dights in this hilly retreat of Chittagong. The pro-

cess is already on and there is no time to lose. The problem is not peculiar to the Rauzan station. All power generating stations must have been regularly fouling up environment in the absence of government's insistence on setting up only 'clean' electric stations. The Rauzan plant, on top of that, has failed to work out a harm-free way for disposal of its waste water. A vernacular national daily has blamed it all on the plant authority's sheer callousness about doing something

thoughtful about the water. The area under this uninvited threat is Mahamuni, Pahartoli — a holy place of pilgrimage for Buddhists of this country as well as of far off lands including China and Japan. Mahamuni is very dear and very special to so many people that one cannot imagine it being violated due to sheer

carelessness. We draw the attention of both the energy and environment ministries to do something there very urgently.

World White Cane Safety Day

A Question of Widening Our Vision

The five modes of travel commonly used by visually impaired persons are :

()) independent travel without the use of devices or any other outside assistance (2) the sighted guide (3) the white or long cane (4) dog guides (5) electronic devices.

The white or long cane is the device most widely used by visually impaired persons for independent travel. The traveller does not 'tap' the cane, but 'sweeps' it lightly in an arc while walking, to gain information about the path ahead. Properly used the cane enables the traveller to detect obstacles such as curbs, stairs, doors, holes etc changes in the travel surface (for example from grass to concrete or from a rug to a wooden floor) can also be detected on step in advance. The age at which a child is provided formal training in the use of a cane depends on the student's maturity, need for more inde-

pendent travel. The decision to initiate formal training in the use of a cane is made after careful con sideration. Generally instruc tion in the use of the cane is not started until age 14 or 15. but some children succeed in learning cane technique as early as 11 or 12. The reasons for waiting until the student is 14 or 15 generally relate to his or her ability to profit from instruction and more importantly. the need for a more independent mode of travel.

There are many types of canes, but the most common are made of aluminium or fibregiass and are approximately by Prof Sultana Sarwatara Zaman

1/2 inch in diameter. Some have a crook for balance and easy placement; others have a golf-club type grip. The tip of the cane is usually made of steel or nylon. Other types of canes have been devised based

on research. A major factor in mobility is learning how to avoid obstacles. It has been long realized that many people who are blind are able to avoid obstacles very well. They make turns in hallways; they stop before they run into a door. How do they do it? Do they sense a change in air pressure on their faces? Do they use residual light and dark vision? Do they use their sense of hearing? Forty years ago Cotzin and Dallenbach (1950) carried out a series of experiments to find the answer. They asked the people with blindness to walk down a path and stop when they sensed an obstacle. Then the researchers began to systematically eliminate various possibilities - such as cues for air pressure: residual vision, elimination of hearing - each in turn.

came a definitive answer The subjects judgement came when the ears were blocked. Clearly they were using sound to detect barriers in their path, much like bats do. The knowledge that hearing is an essential element in obstacle perception has led educators to focus on enhanc ing (in natural and artificial ways) the use of hearing to increase mobility. In the decades since Cotzin and Dallenbach's study other scientists have worked to devise electronic aids

Out of these experiments

to mobility. Two of these - the Sonicguide and the Laser Cane - are now being used by people who are blind to move around more easily. A Laser Bean Cane emits a sound to signal objects in the path of a Traveller, as well as hazards overhead and drop- offs below. A Sonicguide sends out sound waves to

bounce off objects and give the trained traveller information about the environment. Mobility aids like these, in modified versions, are increasingly being used with blind and visually impaired infants and young children. They appear to have much potential for enhancing children's independence and early learning, by allowing them to explore the environment more thoroughly Although it is encouraging to see research being conducted in this most important area, it does not seem that any one device will meet the needs of all

individuals. The decision as to which type of mobility aid or device will be best in a given case is a purely individual matter. It must be made by the student. parents, and the orientation and mobility specialists with whom they work. For most blind persons, a combination of modes of travel, depending on immediate location and circumstances, seems to be best.

Situation in Bangladesh

in a country like Bangladesh where 30,000 children are becoming blind every year due to mainutrition, poverty, and Vit 'A' deficiency, training these

children in the use of cane is far from reality. However once a child becomes blind it is the responsibility of the family, society and finally the state to give the child security, protection, education and training for sur-

In Bangladesh a handful of blind people use white cane for mobility purpose. These white canes are given to the blind by our government or by non-government organizations working for the blind in this country. such as Bangladesh National Society for the Blind (BNSB) Assistance for Blind Children (ABC) and others. These canes were in the past brought from Hong Kong or other foreign countries and distributed among the blind people.

At present there is only one white Cane Industry run by a blind person who was trained abroad. The white canes are made either with thick round Sylhet canes or with steel. The white cane made with Sylhet cane are sold approximately for Tk. 60/70 and the steel canes which could be folded are sold for Tk. 150. ABC purchases these white canes and distributes free among the blind school students. But the most important factor which needs to be addressed is where are the specialists to train blind students in mobility and use of cane or any other mode of travel for the visually impaired? Or for that matter where are the schools for the blind children? The number of blind children attending schools in Bangladesh is very small. This is again could be due to lack of trained teachers in this area. It is unfortunate that there are no

the blind in the country. Most of the programmes for the visually impaired taken up by various organizations are either making surveys or organizing eye-camps for cataract operations or distributing vitamin 'A' tablets. Of course these are necessary as preventive measures but the children who have lost their eye sight also need training and education to become a useful member of the society. Without such special education the blind child either becomes a burden to the family or a beggar for its own survival The same story can be repeated for a deaf child. There are a small number of deaf children who attend school usually run, by untrained teachers. It is surprizing that even till to-day no standard sign language has been developed for the hearing impaired in this country. On the other hand in our neighbouring countries like India and Pakistan. TV news and public lectures in many places are accompanied with simultaneous translation in sign language. It is time that our policy makers, NGOs as well as donor agencies understand the necessity of training the special educators and teachers for the disabled if we want to rehabilitate them in the truest sense. Finally I would like to re-it-

erate that the 'observance' of White Cane Day and Children Right's Day' needs to be continued in our country till the people and especially the policy makers become aware of the rights of these neglected popullation and come forward with concrete programmes to help mitigate their sufferings.

(The author is Chairman, Department of Special Education, Dhaka University)

Why British are So Unsure about Their Police

Jill Forrester writes from London

In 1989 English courts released four Irish prisoners, acknowledging that the police had lied and

bullied them into confessing. Many thought a new era of openness and honesty was dawning.

Now, publication of a report of a Royal Commission into criminal justice shows Britain has still not

HERE was a time when the British police force enjoyed the firm trust of the British public. Police had much greater freedom to use their discretion and had fewer rule books to follow. The terrorist campaign by the extremist Irish Republican Army (IRA) now challenges one of the world's oldest and most

NTERNATIONAL Fede

as the "World Blind Union"

declared "15th October" of every

year to be observed as the

"World White Cane Safety Day"

during the Conference held

from September 29 to October

2, 1969 held in Colombo (Shri

Lanka). Since then "World

White Cane Safety Day' is being

observed with a call for

ensuring safety and realizing

the rights of the visually

handicapped in many countries,

especially in Bangladesh. For

the last few years it has been

observed in Bangladesh with

use of white cane was intro-

duced for the visually impaired

individuals. May be one hun-

dred years ago or may be more.

The education programme of a

visually impaired child could

hardly be considered complete

or appropriate if it failed to in-

clude instruction in orientation

ability to establish ones position

in relation to the environment

through the use of the remain-

ing senses and Mobility is the

ability to move safely and effi-

ciently from one point to an-

other. Included in this process

are such skills as proper heel

and toe gait, control of the

body's centre of gravity, ability

to detect inclines and declines.

obstacle detection and others.

We must remember that sighted

persons learn a great deal more

through the visual channel than

most of us realize and that a vi-

sually impaired person learn

the same things with no or lim-

ited vision. In combination ori-

entation and mobility provides

the visually impaired person the

ability to move about indepen-

dently. Independent travel is

accomplished by using the au-

ditory, tactual, kinesthetic, ol-

factory and any other senses.

Orientation is defined as the

We do not know when the

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ch is presently known

respected justice systems. When police arrested and charged three men and one woman, later known as the Guildford Four, with causing the bombing deaths of five people in pubs south west of London in 1974, a frightened public was eager to feel that the police had some control over an alarming situation.

The four maintained their innocence, claiming that their confessions, the only evidence against them, were forced from them with threats and beatings by police. Three had alibis.

Fifteen years later, in 1991. the decision was overturned when conclusive evidence of the fabrication of confessions was produced. To many Britons, the event was as astonishing as the fall of communism in the Soviet Union, which occurred that same year.

Their release paved the way for the overturning of five similar verdicts, freeing 16 people, including a woman with serious mental difficulties known to have confessed to other crimes she had not committed. One was only 14 when arrested. Another died in jail.

Questionable acts continue to take place regularly. Most recently Irishman John Matthews was arrested and accused of hijacking a taxi to drive with a bomb to the Prime Minister's residence. Matthews was released after proving an alibi, but was banned from Britain, as the government claim to have evidence of his involvement in terrorism.

Innocent even after proven

Balancing the scales of justice

faced up to the widespread decett that was revealed.

Now in danger of being on an Irish loyalist "hit list" for his alleged pro-independence activities, Matthews still claims innocence. "All they wanted was an Irishman in jail so they could write off another crime. They were not interested in justice," he is reported to have

The treatment of Irish people has been noted by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Liberty. The Prevention of Terrorism Act, says Liberty, has given the English licence to mistreat the Irish in particular. It adds:

"Terrorist atrocities are often followed by mass arrests ... Trials take place in a highly charged atmosphere amidst strict security and there is evidence that authorities may have orchestrated media interest in certain cases to increase the chances of obtaining convic-

Britain has no bill of human rights and is only loosely bound by the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The National Association of Probation Officers has estimated that up to 800 people are currently wrongfully jailed.

The government responded in 1991 by ordering a Royal Commission on Criminal Justice to recommend ways of preventing future miscarriages and restoring shattered public confidence in the system.

Two years later the Royal Commission has published 352 recommendations. Many have received praise, but they fail to show a way out of the confusion that surrounds the British justice system. Some proposals, such as video recording of all police interviews, creation of an independence body to look into miscarriages of justice, and a help-line for police officers to report corruption anonymously are indeed designed to check police and protect the public from further miscarriages of justice.

Others, however, were made to strengthen the powers of the police, who feel increasingly restricted by the growing number of regulations and guidelines imposed in recent years, and increasingly disrespected by the public.

The Commission proposes. for example, to continue allowing confessions unaccompanied by other evidence as sufficient for a guilty verdict, while many human rights groups has been calling for an end to uncorroborated confessions. Liberty says: "Uncorroborated confession evidence remains one of the biggest single causes of innocent people going to prison."

Other proposals also reflect concern for lack of resources. such as ending the right to trial by jury of those accused of crimes like theft, assault, childbeating and drug dealing. The recommendation can only have been based on the interest of cost-cutting, not of justice," says the Law Society, which, along with many others, is appalled at the thought of threatening one of the pillars of

British justice. While cost is an increasingly important factor in the functioning of the system, the Commission does not present a coherent strategy for cost cutting. It does not present a coherent strategy for anything. say most crities.

The Bar Council said: "The central failure of the Royal Commission's report ... is that it has not analysed why these miscarriages occurred, or made sufficient recommendations to prevent further miscarriages." One strong critic is Chris

Mullin, labour politician and author of Error of Judgement the Truth about the Birmingham Bombings. "The Commission has utterly underestimated the scale of the problem," he argues, pointing out that "the scale of the fraud and perjury uncovered in the Birmingham and Guildford cases is massive." While a few members of the police have been open enough to admit that perjury is a way of life, he says. particularly in some elite detective squads, the Commission fails to address the problem.

The Commission recommends that police, scientists and prosecutors certify in writing that they have revealed all evidence, but Mullin would like deliberate failure to disclose evidence to be a criminal offence. Police officers involved in suppression or fabrication of evidence in the past have suffered few if any consequences, says Mullin, and at least one of those involved is now in a senior position within the police

Roger Ede, of the Legal Action Group, argues that the system must make "the fruits of investigation belong to both sides," rather than just the prosecution, and that the defence should be much more involved in the investigation.

Dr Lucia Zedner, of the Howard League for Penal Reform, believes that dealing with limited resources means big future problems, but to make any kind of decision on strategy, greater understanding among its various parts is necessary. "It's all horribly atomised," she says, with everyone measuring success in different

Police, for example, measure their success in the number of convictions they get, while the courts often see prison as a last

The Howard League is presenting its own series of proposals to the government for increased opportunities for communication, training, and strategic planning within the system. Other European system work in much better harmony with one another, she says.

Police generally accept the recommendations, but warn that changes like the installation and operation of video cameras without extra funding will put the already demoralised and underfunded police force through great strain.

While the recent releases of prisoners and the publication of the Commission give the im pression of change, many are shocked at the capacity of some police officers and politicians to deny a problem exists. Mullin is appalled at rumours circulating that those freed from jail were released only on "technicalities," while whole books of evidence show the extent of dishonesty and bullying that took place.

In the past few years, many had reason to hope that the new openness would bring and new sense of justice and fairness. As in the former Soviet Union, however, the new openness has brought more confusion and less real change than people hoped for.

A commentator says : "In matters of morality, the British have never been more unsure of themselves. Certainties have collapsed." — GEMINI NEWS

JILL FORRESTER is a London-based Canadian freelance journalist.

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

"... a good move badly handled"

Sir. You deserve special thanks from the members of the public for your editorial on Insurance Cos which appeared in your esteemed daily on 21.8.1993. You aptly pointed out that the insurance companies have been tardy in meeting their legal obligation. Their plea that the existing legal framework has been holding up floatation of public shares is not justified. Four of the insurance companies which started functioning in 1985 successfully offered their shares for public subscription after obtaining guarantee from the banks to underwrite unsold shares in 1989. In fact none of the shares of these companies remained unsold. Since, in their case, the banks could give guarantee in 1989 when they had been investing at a much higher rate of interest than at present, the argument that banks are reluctant to give guarantee to underwrite unsold shares in 1993 when the interest rate for investment has gone down substantially, cannot be tenable.

As for the question of absorption capacity of the share market, there should not be any shortage of investors in shares of a company when the interest on FDR. Savings Account etc. has gone down drastically. However, to ask all the 14 defaulting companies to float their shares within a period of three months will naturally raise suspicion regarding absorption capacity of the share market. Their demand that the offer of shares to the public should be staggered is worth considering. There can be two way out. One is that the companies should be asked to offered shares to the public in order of their dates of registration giving, say, two months time to each. This may put the companies which were registered earlier but could not declare reasonable dividend at a disadvantage. The second alternative is to ask the company which has given highest dividend to go for floatation immediately and then followed by the company which stands second on the basis of the amount of declared dividend and so on, after, of course, giving two months time to each. In other words, a roster of the defaulting companies in the descending order of the amount of dividend declared during 1991 and 1992 may be drawn up and the companies rather be compelled to offer shares to the public in that order, each within two months time.

The members of the public would have got some dividend if these companies floated their shares in time. Deprivation of the public in the matter of dividend is more in case of a company which declared higher dividend than in the case of a company which declared less dividend. So if the Government adopts the second formula then the public will be benefited more. As an intending subscriber I urge the government to . adopt this. A S M Faruque

Shahjahanpur, Dhaka

Gano Forum

Sir, I would like to extend hearty thanks to Dr Kamal Hossain and his associates for introducing a new direction in our country's political trend. A political party with real good motives to introduce an institution based politics was inevitable for our country. Dr. Hossain has taken the lead and we extend best wishes towards materialisation of his hopes and aspirations.

At the moment the Gano Forum has chalked out one of its major activities as to work against terrorism. In fact if the root of the individual problems are deeply looked into, and gradually controlled in a systematic process, the nation's major problems will be solved. It will be a great aid to the government if the Forum can really achieve success with their sincere efforts and continuous motivation, towards elimination of terrorism and other disturbances. We want the country to be free from all kinds of problems. So it is hoped that the Gano Forum will try their best to fulfil the nation's high expectation of them.

Mottus Samad Chowdhury. Phultola Tea Estate, Sylhet

Traffic jam at Jatrabari

Sir, Jatrabari is one of the busiest traffic points in Dhaka city. It is widely believed that the number of various types of vehicles passing through this point in a single day is the highest in the country. For road communication, this is the entry point to the capital city from whole Chittagong Division and eastern, north-eastern and south-eastern districts of the Dhaka Division. In addition to that, road communication be-

tween the northern region of the country and the port city Chittagong is also maintained through Jatrabari traffic point. Besides the inter-district vehicles, a large number of inter city vehicles of various types also run through this point. After completion of the Burigonga Friendship Bridge near Postogola and with progressive construction of the new highway connecting Dhaka and Khulna, road traffic is further increasing rapidly through this point. Some buses of Dhaka-Khulna, Dhaka-Barisal and some other routes have already started running by this new under construction highway.

At present, the huge number of vehicles that pass through Jatrabari always face traffic jam and it has become a permanent, point of traffic jam. At Jatrabari, traffic jam always occurs not due to the huge number of various types of vehicles. Most of the time, the jam occurs because of mismanagement of traffic system and unauthorised parking of vehicles in and around the crossing. The traffic congestion here is increased due to the bus stands just on the road all around the crossing. All the incoming and outgoing buses always make stoppage indiscriminately on the road. Moreover, a large number of buses of city routes have made here a permanent bus stand (not only a simple

bus stop). The buses of separate routes make separate rows on the road to maintain their separate serial numbers and thus they almost close the whole road. This situation is further aggravated by the stoppage made by the large number of rickshaws and auto-tempos around the crossing. These are the main causes of traffic jam at Jatrabari.

It is necessary to take some measures to make Jatrabari crossing a traffic jam free area for easy movement of the large number of vehicles. The bus stands, mentioned above, should immediately be shifted from here, maybe to the back side of Demra thana, the site filled by municipality. Parking or stoppage of any kind of vehicle in and around the crossing should be strictly prohibited. The buses can make a short stoppage only for passenger loading/unloading at least 500 feet away from the crossing. For this, like Mohakhali bus stop, a separate single lane could be demarcated by road divider. Strict measures, including monetary punishment, should be imposed for unauthorised parking or stoppage by any kind of vehicle around the crossing. If these measures are enforced, the traffic jam at Jatrabari would surely go.

M A Hossain 61 Dolatpar, Dhaka-1204