

FOCUS

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

The Resurgence of English-medium Schools

THE sun may have set 50 years ago for the British Empire in this part of the world, but one of its more enduring legacies, the English Medium School, has persisted, and after a long hiatus, has resurfaced stronger than ever. On the birth of Bangladesh, an outpouring of nationalistic zeal tinged with more than a smidgen of linguistic xenophobia caused the near extinction of English medium schools. These institutions were viewed as citadels of elitism, the breeding ground of a privileged class alienated from their indigenous culture and values. For many, their mere existence was an affront to national pride, a reminder of a colonial past (first British and then Pakistani), where Bangla, the mother tongue of the majority of the population was relegated to a secondary role, a bit player on the national stage. In the newly independent Bangladesh, children would no longer be subject to the cruel indignities of trying to emulate an alien culture, of trying to be second class English or American men or women. Instead they would rejoice in learning in their mother-tongue. No longer would the inability to speak English fluently be a handicap to career advancement, or a source of social embarrassment.

The campaign to abolish English medium schools, and to disallow English as a medium of instruction while largely stemming from lofty (perhaps in retrospect, somewhat misplaced) ideals, had also a certain element of class conflict. For all of those who believed they were outside the so called 'magic circle' of English medium students, for those who were slighted in the job and marriage markets for being insufficiently westernized, this was the time of reckoning, a time of comeuppance for their tormentors.

Thus, a system of education which provided a small but significant group of students with the necessary skills to interact with the wider world outside Bangladesh was dismantled very rapidly, a victim of shortsighted nationalistic zeal. At a time when countries like Singapore and even India were expanding the English language skills of their educated class in order to rapidly assimilate into the world economy, we in Bangladesh were retreating into our cocoon, cutting ourselves off from the international arena. We who had by an accident of history been given a position of advantage in having a relatively bilingual educated class, consciously frittered away that benefit in the euphoria of independence.

In the intervening two and a half decades since the birth of Bangladesh, there has been a precipitous decline in the command of English. Even a casual perusal of English language newspapers (with some notable exceptions) reveals a hodgepodge of grammatically incorrect, unidiomatic Victorian usage. In an era where international linkages are mushrooming in every sphere and English has become the de-facto lingua franca of the world, in Bangladesh it is difficult to find individuals who can express themselves even mini-

mally in English. I despair for an educational system where a masters graduate can barely construct a grammatically correct sentence, leave alone a paragraph in English.

It is only in the last five years that the situation has started to reverse. Now one sees English medium schools mushrooming in every corner, and there is a mad rush by parents to enroll their children in such schools. That which was reviled is now revered. Bangladeshis never seem to do things by halves.

There is however a basic difference in the situation as it existed before 1971 and that which exists now. While in the earlier period English medium schools were expensive but not completely out of reach of the middle

class, nowadays, they seem to have become the exclusive preserve of the rich. The irony is that a mildly elitist system has been replaced with one of extreme polarization.

Let I be accused of harboring colonial sympathies, let me state categorically, that I agree with the notion that some English medium students did, and do end up American, and the sinners are natives or Indians. One of the more regrettable aspects of such schools is that for quite a few of the students, English instead of being a complement to Bangla becomes a substitute. These individuals then fall into the trap of interpreting their own societies through the filter of a foreign language centered in a completely different cultural ethos, with all its baggage of imperialism and ethnocentricity.

While one should be aware of the possible pitfalls of an English medium education, it is important to realize that such dangers are neither universal, nor inevitable. An English medium education can be, and is in many cases, a broadening experience. Properly structured, it can produce well adjusted individuals who are both at home in their own societies and comfortable in dealing with those in the larger world outside.

Leaving aside concerns about cultural alienation, the reality is that for most middle class parents, the decision to enroll their children in English medium schools stems more from a desire for high quality education than an obsession with Westernization. Parents want their children to be part of an orderly, coherent, and modern educational framework which teaches its students effective numeric and language skills. Unfortunately Bangla medium secondary schools by and large are hostage to a system of archaic centralized national examinations which reward rote memorization more than independent thinking. It is a

but true testament of the deplorable state of secondary school education in Bangladesh, that twenty four years after independence, people have so little faith in the indigenous educational structure that those who can afford it are scrambling to have their children study in a system designed for a different world, and a different cultural ethos.

I view the recent explosion of English medium schools with some ambivalence. To the extent that they provide alternative higher quality educational venues to existing Bangla medium schools, coupled with the broadening experience of learning another language in addition to your own, they are a positive factor. This is especially true if they provide an incentive to existing Bangla medium schools to improve their quality. However their high costs essentially limit their utility in this regard, as they can only be afforded by a small section of the population for whom sending their children to Bangla medium schools has never been a real option.

The exorbitant expense of English medium schools raises some disturbing equity issues. In the current context of Bangladesh, where English medium de-facto has become a proxy for higher quality, and access to this quality is severely restricted, we seem to be moving towards a situation where only a select few (the children of the rich) can gain the necessary skills to compete in an increasingly complex technological world.

The writer is Assistant Professor of Demography, Harvard University.

REFLECTIONS



by Dr Omar Rahman

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Divorce

A woman enters her conjugal home in the hope that she will come out of it only after passing through this life and not before that. At least that's how she felt just a few decades ago.

No matter how much she had to give up in order to adjust, how much she had to tolerate, our great-grandmother, grandmother, even mother, accepted discrimination and cruelty as her fate and sacrificed her individuality, her entire existence, just to stay married. They never uttered a word against their in-laws or husband that was

something close to committing a sin.

But that 'was' and is now only in the past. Our women are finally conscious of their stand and their capability, and aware of their rights. They no longer want to be treated as just another person, or a mere nobody, in their husband's home. And thus the recent rise in the rate of divorce in Bangladesh.

The reason is quite simple. The sudden realization by our country's women of the discrimination they face in every possible form, and then the more sudden urge to revolt and break free of the chains, has led to this marked trend.

"While women were being made conscious on the one hand, the men were left in the dark, that is, with their age-old chauvinistic attitude towards their women," says Alena Khan, Legal Retainer of Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR).

As a result of this gap growing between the two genders, in matters regarding the changes of thought taking place, opinions were formed, differences were felt, and ultimately these clashes led to divorces.

"Since women have now discovered themselves, they have also found the strength to face society as a divorcee, they no longer think of how people will react to them

by Raffat Binte Rashid

cases, revealing yet another case of forsaken wives.

"Abandoned wives are more pathetic a case because they cannot settle their lives. They have traceless husbands," Alena Khan adds relating one of her case experiences.

A girl was married to a boy who went off to Australia only after 22 days of their marriage. Her married life is a year and half long now, but her husband is refusing on to take her to live in Australia with him. Her fault, according to her in-laws, of course, is her way of living. Her in-

laws asked her to sleep in the same room with them. When she refused the proposal as being absurd, they reported that she had no morals and is not obliging to her in-laws, and thus the obedient son is planning other things. The girl can neither divorce nor remarry.

"Women are always the victim of a vicious cycle of discrimination. Society, parents and husbands; we cannot lead our own lives because we fear society and its people, and are indirectly being ruled by them. Then, also it is the love for our parents that many times stops us from doing what our minds actually want, and finally it is the husband, we have to adjust to his whims and nature," Khan reveals her views.

In cases where a girl is abandoned by her husband living abroad, it is the girl's parents who should be the guilty party for being greedy and destroying a life. Then of course there are examples where a man in the village marries (in village terms kabin kora) and leaves for somewhere in the Middle East. He sends her some money but on his return — a moneyed man, then — finds her unsuitable for his sophisticated life, and deserts her for good. Khan relates this as an example of many of her cases.

Indiscriminate Use of Chemical Pesticide

Revival of Traditional Pest Control

JUST a block away from the complex of CARDI (Central Assessment and Resource Development Institute) in Joydevpur where experts were training to minimise the use of chemical pesticide on our soil, a half-finished factory unit was formulating chemical pesticide in full swing.

The unfinished structure of the factory building looked spectral with a colourful signboard in front of it, but things appeared busy inside. For, the lucrative business of chemical pesticide in the country has been attracting many to rush into the trade.

Some started formulating and delivering the deadly chemical to the naive users before even completing their premises. And it is widely alleged that a good number of these factories do not conform to any standard with respect to environment or public health.

The result of indiscriminate use of chemical pesticide on our soil, by the simple and unsuspecting farming mass, has just started to emerge. Not only has fertility plummeted beyond our imagination, it has also polluted our water bodies, killed natural pisciculture, engulfed us with known and unknown diseases and exterminated a range of wildlife.

In the face of an ever increasing demand for food, the pressure is ever-present to produce more, and achieve self sufficiency in food production. Successive governments have launched themselves in achieving these goals within their 'term' of power in order to earn popularity. Use of chemical fertilizer and deadly pesticide was seen as a quick solution.

Highly toxic pesticide, banned or restricted in any developed country, found its way easily into the fields of this land. The existing laws of the land, regarding formulation and marketing of chemical pesticide, were manipulated and curved at will by a section of people to assure their own interests.

But the silver lining in the dark clouds of the chemical pesticide is now beginning to show with the experts trying to find a way out and by-passing the use of this lethal formula.

Inside CARDI, experts of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) were running a seasonal training course for 34 field workers as a part of a project called Inter-country Programme for Integrated Pest Management in Rice in South and South East Asia, or IPM (Integrated Pest Management). Sixteen countries in the region are now

funded by FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation). The seasonal training session emphasises sticking to a very traditional and effective method of pest management and using chemical pesticide as a last resort.

"We have nothing against chemical pesticide," said Dr M A Latif, Deputy Director of IPM, "but we want to tell our farmers that there are other ways to control pest."

The whole idea of the project which has already been

activated in at least 95 thanas of 45 districts, involving nearly thirty thousand farmers of the country, is to use natural ingredients and a "little bit of intelligence" to fight pest in the paddy fields.

Among the natural ingredients to keep the paddy fields pestfree are the wide range of friendly insects and wildlife such as the Spider, Carabid Beetle, Densel Fly, Frog, Lady bird, Wasp and

being part of an alienated elite detached from the majority culture. One cannot help but be ambivalent about and educational system, which at best ignores, and at worst patronizes one's indigenous values and beliefs. There is many a horror story of Bangladeshi children reciting nursery rhymes, and reading stories, where the saints are European or

most non-existent.

"Once chemical use is avoided in the fields, the farmers can grow fish in the paddy fields," said Latif, "and this has proved to be a very profitable business." Farmers are to dig a water reservoir beside the field so that different fish can be cultivated. In case of a dry spell the fish can shelter in the reservoir.

"Around the perimeter of these fields, an embankment is built and different kinds of vegetables are grown there."

said A Abbas, Assistant Director of IPM. He added that the vegetables grown on the embankments not only bring good incentives for the farmers but also help conserve the friendly insects.

"When the harvest is over in the paddy fields, the beneficial insects can find refuge in these plants and reproduce," Abbas said. In addition to using the beneficial insects to fight pest in the paddy fields, the farmers are required to select healthy seeds, use correct spacing between saplings, keep the field weedfree, adopt synchronised cultivation and have proper water management.

The use of chemical fertilizer comes as the last resort, when everything else has failed," Abbas noted.

Occasionally the farmers are required to make a methodical check on their paddy fields, if the saplings are found to be infested then a net is used to lightly comb through the area. Besides, use of other traditional methods to fight pest is also taught under the project.

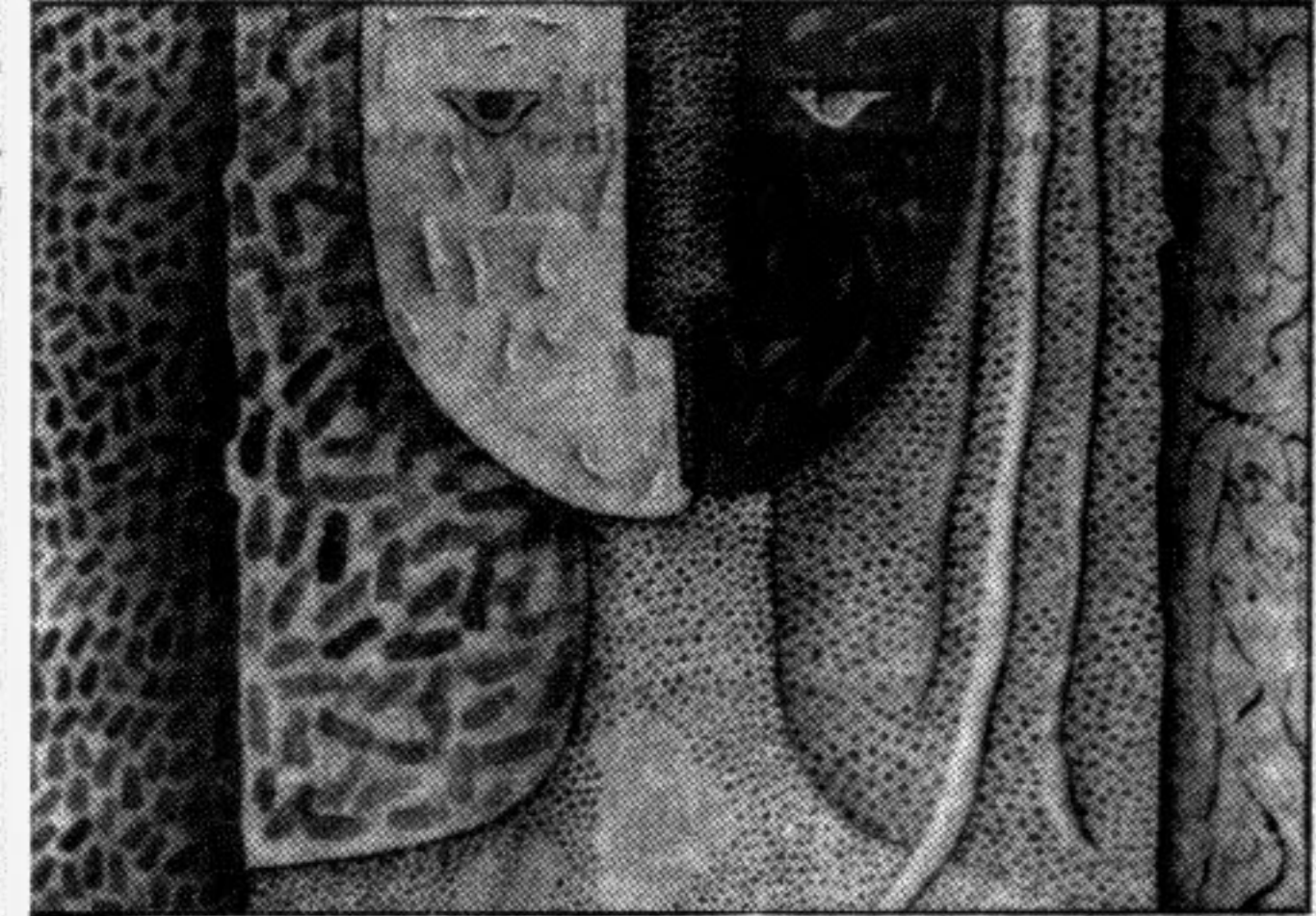
So far, under the IPM project nearly 2,500 DAE officers have been trained to pass the message onto farmers. These officers offer practical field training in such a way that the farmers are able to comprehend the method easily and implement it independently. At present there are 91 Farmers' IPM Field Schools in the country.

Recent studies on 300 IPM farmers have shown that these farmers could reduce pesticide costs by 92 per cent after they received training to adopt the method. In addition, the trained farmers have come up with a "Brilliant" 24 per cent increase in their rice yield.

"The country which has really freed itself from the stranglehold of pesticide abuse is Indonesia. This was possible because IPM was taken seriously there," said Shykh Seraj, comper of Mati-O-Manush on BTV.

According to a report recently prepared by Dr S Ramaswamy, an IPM specialist for South Asia, rice is produced in over 10.5 million hectares of land, and over 70 million farmers are engaged in rice cultivation. Thus, the magnitude of the task of educating the country's farmers is such that unless there is a massive mobilization in different sectors, the IPM method will progress but only at a turtle's pace.

In the meantime, the nefarious pesticide-producing factories will flourish in their bid to earn cash, profiting in the lack of awareness among 70 million farmers.



The main reason why such divorces or desertion occur frequently in the villages is ignorance. The people are ignorant about basic laws, and therefore lack civil sense.

Among affluent couples, or people of the upper class, divorces occur quite frequently because of personal conflict. Whereas, the middle class couple fears society, and needs the security. Thus, divorce among them is less common; either the woman adjusts or they both compromise.

However, the men's attitude is changing. But slowly. They, for the sake of family ties, prefer separation rather than an ultimatum. This is more so in the upper and middle class families.

A man married for the last 15 years feels that divorce with kids and without kids has two different meanings. The impact is more downgrading psychologically when more lives are involved. Divorce is always bad for kids.

"Then it is the wives who face most of the problems in this male dominated society. A husband escapes with minor injuries," he says.

According to his opinion, a divorce happens after a certain period of time, because of personality clashes, social and financial pressures, and, of course, if men are weak and are mother's pet sons.

"Bangladeshi women are now more conscious, they have the economic freedom in the villages because of NGOs' work. There is a beautiful and positive change among them, and thus divorce rates have also gone up. It is mainly because of this basic economic freedom," he says.

Single women who have a modern and smart approach towards life, feel that marriage is not 'the thing in life', they want a partner who will not impose on her individuality, and at the same time treat her as an equal human. Such are the new approaches towards being married, happily, for ever.



Field level experts surveying prospects for natural pest management.

— Photo courtesy FAO

South Pacific You Can't Sink a Rainbow

by David Robie

AUCKLAND — The two French secret service agents crouched low into the icy breeze as they motored across the harbour. The southern hemisphere winter made it bitterly cold even in their waterproof jackets and wet-suits.

When they were close enough, the two switched off the four-horsepower outboard motor and paddled their Zodiac raft towards the wharf where the boat was berthed.

Donning flippers, oxygen tanks and masks, the frogmen slipped into the inky water. They attached one ten kg umbomb to the propeller shaft, and another 15 kg explosive to the hull outside the engine room.

The first blast at 9:00 PM of Jul. 10, 1985, ripped a hole the size of a garage door in the hull of the Rainbow Warrior. The shocked crew scrambled to the wharf as the ship began sinking. But Portuguese-born photographer Fernando Pereira dashed down a narrow stairway to his stern cabin to rescue his cameras.

The second explosion probably stunned him as the seawater surged into the cabin. Pereira drowned with his camera straps tangled around his legs.

The converted North Sea trawler was used by Greenpeace to protest French nuclear testing in the South

Pacific and had just arrived in Auckland from Vanuatu. Its sinking sent shock waves of revulsion around the world against state-sponsored terrorism.

Exactly ten years later, French naval commandos stormed Rainbow Warrior II off Mururoa atoll. Via short-wave radio, Greenpeace anti-nuclear campaign manager Stephanie Mills gave a blow-by-blow account of the boarding as French frigates rammed the ship, commandos climbed on board and began blow-torching the door.

The Greenpeace ship had been sailing through the South Pacific to protest the

decision by new French President Jacques Chirac to resume underground nuclear testing at Mururoa.

The French themselves now have to deal with the effects of Chirac's decision on their relations with South Pacific islanders.

France tried to rehabilitate its heavy-handed colonial image that had got tarnished with a sabotage that many saw as an example of 'state terrorism' and atomic gangsterism.

Greenpeace studies have shown radioactivity in plankton found near Mururoa, and plutonium in seawater. But most French health tests on the residents of the atolls are a military secret.

— Gemini News