

Feature

Ray of light, ray of hopes

Darkness surrounded most of her life. For a greater part of her childhood, adolescence and teenage years, Parul Bala was unable to see the red of a rose, the green of the grass or the blue of the sky. Day and night hardly any difference.

Afflicted by juvenile cataract in both of her eyes at an early age, Parul Bala, now 18, was deprived of the basic gift of life - eyesight. Almost fully blind, Parul resigned herself to a life of darkness. The daughter of a poor day-labourer Moni Chandra in Aditmari of Lalmonirhat district, she had no hope of having her sight back. Neither she nor her family had the slightest idea that an operation could remove the cataract and restore Parul's eyesight. They were aware of medical possibilities; however, they could hardly afford the option. An operation on Parul's eyes could cost them two thousand taka, at the least.

But today Parul can see. It is no miracle nor did Moni Chandra's family have a sudden windfall. It was the Community-based Eye Care Project that has made all the difference.

RDRS, the well-known NGO in the northern region of the country, launched this project in October 1999. As a one-year pilot project funded by MEMISA, the Community-based Eye Care Project aims to address eye-related problems in the Aditmari and Lalmonirhat thanas of Lalmonirhat district. Its objectives are to treat eye-diseases and avoid visual impairment; to perform cataract operations and other eye surgeries; and to establish an integrated and community-based system of preventive, curative and rehabilitative services for eye patients and visually disabled people.

Says the eye surgeon of the Community-based Eye Care project Dr Mohammed Zakiul

Cataract operations, which restore eyesight to the afflicted, may not be miraculous in the big cities of the country where the more affluent population have easy access to expert eye surgeons and clinics. However, now people of the poverty-stricken north see a ray of hopes. The RDRS Community-Based Eye Care Project offers eye care services to poor villagers of Lalmonirhat and Aditmari thanas, reports PROBE News Agency

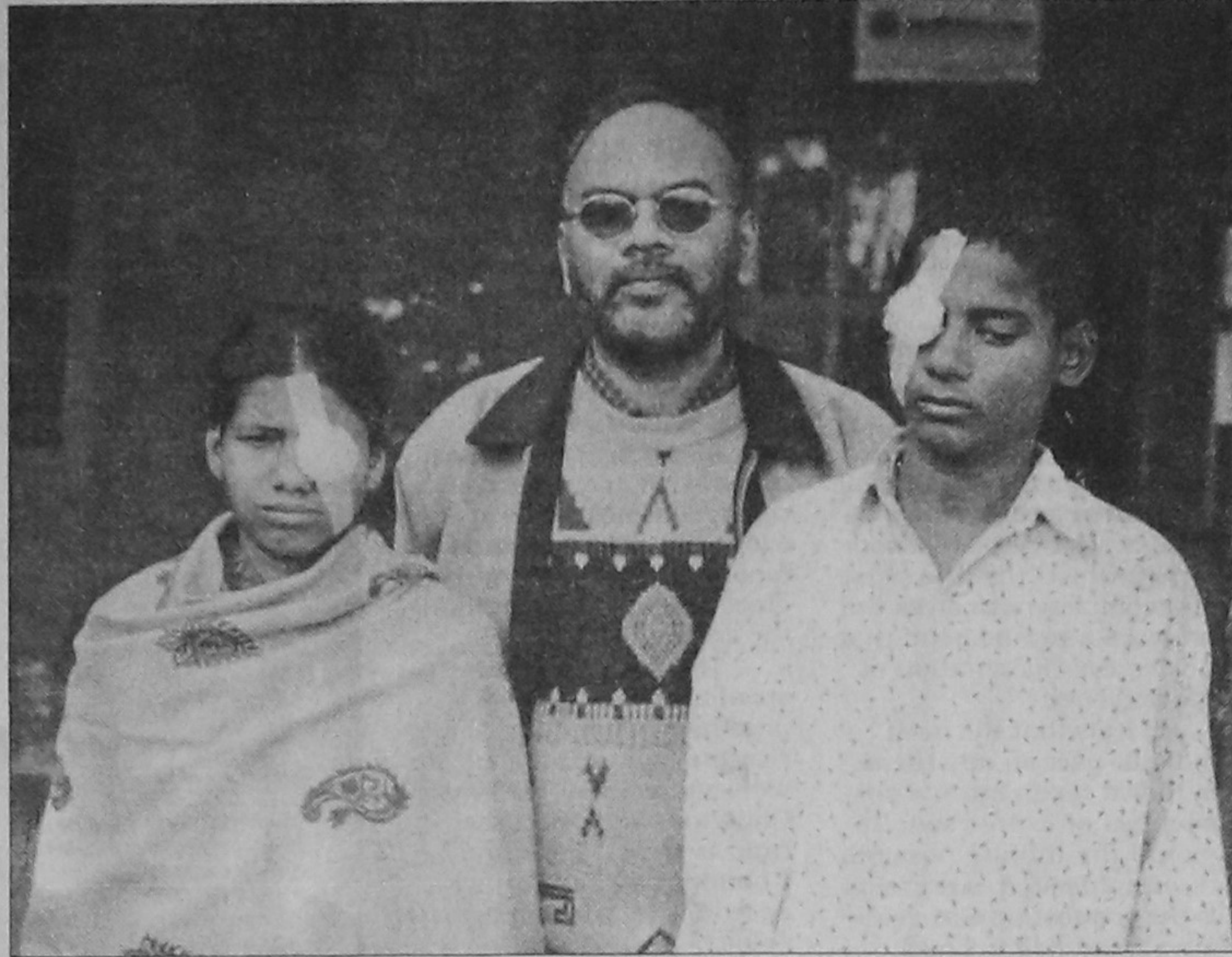
Islam, better known as Dr Zaki. "This project is a wonderful opportunity for the poor people of these thanas who have been afflicted with cataract or other eye diseases. For example, an eye operation here costs only 100 taka. The same operation would normally cost an absolute minimum of 2000 to 3000 taka. Experts in Dhaka would take about 15,000 taka or more."

Parul now knows that she will no longer be confined to the dark chasm of blindness. Her life has meaning now.

"Her family now hopes she can marry soon, have her own family, something she wouldn't dream of before," said Dr Salima Rahman, co-ordinator of the RDRS Community Health project in Lalmonirhat. Sitting on her bed in the temporary clinic, Parul smiled happily and so did her old grandmother.

"We had never hoped that Parul would be able to see again. And even after the operation, we didn't realise she would see so soon," said Parul's grandmother. As for Parul, her shy smile itself speaks of how elated she is with the results of the operation.

Nearly eleven-year-old Nirmal sat with one eye bandaged. His eyes too were blinded by juvenile cataract, a consequence of malnutrition sprouting from poverty. His mother Arati Bala said that at first they didn't realise he was



Dr Mohammed Zakiul Islam with Parul Bala and Nirmal

partially blind.

"He couldn't study properly or read books. It took us time to realise that he was going blind."

His father Sachin is a poor

farmer for whom it was impossible to afford an operation. But a Community Eye Worker of the RDRS project detected the problem on one of his regular visits

to the area and brought him to the clinic. Here Dr Zaki has operated on Nirmal's eye. He will be operating on the other eye very soon.

"There is a great feeling of being able to do something for these people," said Dr Zaki. "And this project has made it possible for us to perform these operations at such a low cost."

Now both Parul and Nirmal will be given powered glasses so that they can see and read clearly. The project provides the glasses free of cost.

It is not only the young ones who benefit from this project. Regardless of age, patients are being treated and operated upon for various eye ailments here.

Day-labourer Naren was waiting outside the clinic while his old mother was being operated upon.

"She had eye problems for long," he said, "but I could never afford to get her operated upon. Then the RDRS filed workers came to our house and explained that I could get the operation done for 100 taka here. I've managed the money and today she's undergoing an operation on one eye. I'll get the other eye operated upon too."

While the Community-Based Eye Care Project started on October 1, 1999, the first two months was spent in preparations and paperwork. Operations began on December 20, 1999 and since then about 40 operations have been performed. There are six staff nurses employed at the project clinic. The clinic is temporarily housed in a section of the RDRS office complex at Lalmonirhat, but a new clinic is under construction nearby. The new building will have an operation theatre and five beds, to be later extended to 10. There is enough land allocated on the site for further extension in future. The project targets 500 cataract operations annually.

Thus Dr. Zaki with his little team at the Lalmonirhat clinic, toil tirelessly, giving a ray of hope to the people enshrouded with the curse of darkness.

Global English has arrived

By Eric Shackle

If you don't speak English, you won't get the job! Like it or not, that's the message millions around the world are already hearing, reflecting the awesome, ever-growing power of the Internet, where the English language reigns supreme.

Even France has had to swallow its fervent pride in its national language. "Pardon my French, but it's English Only on the Flight Deck for Air France Pilots," said the Wall Street Journal on March 23. "At its Charles de Gaulle hub, Air France will Thursday do what once seemed unthinkable: jettison French," the newspaper reported.

In Asia, the use of English as a global language is being hotly debated in Japan and South Korea, where few people speak it. In India, Pakistan and Singapore, English is an official language, spoken by increasingly large numbers of the work force and more importantly, school and college students.

Then there's Singlish, Singapore's unique variation of English. This is how the Singapore Tourist Board's website describes it: "English is widely spoken in Singapore... or is it? Many first-time visitors have been confounded by the colloquialisms that pepper Singaporeans' speech. This is because we speak very quickly (or so it's been said) and with a distinct Singaporean accent."

Through the years, Singaporeans have developed their own brand of English fondly referred to as 'Singlish'. With our multi-racial background, it's not surprising that 'Singlish' borrows from the many different languages spoken in Singapore.

But there's a serious downside. Dr Hugh de Glanville, retired tropical physician and a committee member of the UK Queen's English Society, devoted to preserving the language, says "While the spread of English to become a lingua franca on earth, at sea, and in the air may introduce many perhaps useful new words and expressions, as generally used it will be a very truncated form of its immensely versatile and beautiful source."

"What is more worrying is that even in England the language is being dumbed down as more and more of younger generations, poorly taught English grammar and literature, discard usages they do not understand."

"Inevitably, generations yet unborn will learn their English from parents speaking such simplified English, who have never read our greatest writers, and hopes of preserving the greatness and the glory of the language will become unrealistic."

American wordsmith Anu Garg, who was born in India, recently invited linguaphiles (word-lovers) around the world to express their views on various facets of English as a global language. Here is a selection of their replies:

Martin Bruczkowski, computer engineer, Singapore: My first language is Polish. For me it's a simple, natural fact, because I was born in Warsaw, Poland, lived there for the first 20 years of my life, and people around me spoke nothing but Polish.

My wife is Malaysian Chinese and doesn't really know what her first language is. Her parents' native tongue is Hakka (a dialect of Chinese), but they come from different parts of the

Hakka-speaking region of China, so they could not communicate too well. Eventually they settled on Cantonese, a different dialect, that they could both understand.

However, their children were strongly encouraged to speak English. Chinese is viewed as a language of the lower classes, and English of educated people. English is thus viewed as a ticket to better jobs, better salaries, safer future. It's a bit like in my country in the Middle Ages - Polish was for peasants, educated people spoke Latin... or even 200 years ago, when Polish was again for peasants, while upper classes switched from Latin to French...

Now my wife speaks to her brothers and sisters in English. It's very sad, really, she scorns for you to speak English. The result is that here in Singapore, a large percentage of the society does not have a first language at all! I know it sounds somewhat unbelievable and contradicts most established linguistic theories.

Many Singaporeans come from homes where parents speak bad, simplified Chinese. Then the kids go to school, where they speak 'Singlish' - a grossly simplified and mishapen form of English. As a result they have a real problem expressing themselves in any living language - hence the exaggerated use of gesticulation and onomatopoeic grunts.

The government is very much aware of this and in the 1970s-80s was heavily pushing the use of English. Then, in the 1990s, the wind changed and the government was telling everyone to start speaking Mandarin... what a mess.

Anyway, my wife thinks that her first language is Cantonese, except that she has problems building a correct sentence in that language without pepper in it with English words. Fortunately, she went to Malaysian primary school and speaks fluent Malay, then to high school in the Netherlands, where she picked up pretty good Dutch, and then graduated from Queens University of Belfast, which resulted in English with lovely Irish inserts... so we have no problems communicating. But she does have to attend classes in Mandarin in order to speak to our son in correct Chinese... isn't it a wonder, that a mother has to take evening classes in her first language so that she can speak correctly to her son...? Truly, this is an interesting part of the world.

Sylvia Leng, of Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: I work for a newspaper company as a technical assistant for the editorial computer system. We have to help our users on all sort of requests - problems on the system, e-mail, Internet usage, almost every day.

I'm Chinese, and English is not my mother-tongue language. I speak and use simple English words to express myself. Though I can handle my Mandarin well, I'm doing a computer course in English, because most of the information on the Web is in English, and I would like to communicate better with my colleagues. I want to enrich my vocabulary and enhance my English, so that my second pair of eyes will help me to explore the world better.

Bill Heaney, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, US, retired policeman: English should be the universal language, because the US and Britain lead the world in communications, sci-

ence, space travel, and medicine, and maybe music. The English language is rich with foreign words and easily borrows them for everyday usage. It is a language that continues to grow, unlike some languages that are limited to territorial zones or religions. The Internet makes English all the more global.

My son, who plays ice hockey in Europe, tells me that only in the east, the Czech Republic and the Balkans, do the people not speak English, but they are beginning to.

Lee Kennedy, analytical chemist, Melbourne, Australia: The rise and rise of English is more fortuitous than anything else. Certainly English, or the Australian version of it, is my first tongue. I love it. It is a harlot of a language, stealing from anyone shamelessly.

The question came up at work (a food laboratory) recently about the differences between a relish and a chutney. A little hunting found that they are basically the same; relish is old English, chutney Hindi; but both are equally accepted. A vast array of pilfered or borrowed words are welcomed and absorbed seamlessly into English. I love it. I do feel for speakers of other languages, though.

It may be apocryphal but the story goes that the Russians believed the first US nuclear reactor was built in a pumpkin patch - a mistranslation of "squash" for "atom". An Australian "Sure. Go for your life" is commonly given as a "yes" response for permission to do something. It does not translate well. So, English it is!

Mind you, I lament the loss of skills in using English. Thanks to bureaucrats, advertisers and TV, the core vocabulary of the average English speaker is being (seemingly at least) constantly eroded.

Susan Yoo, who works in corporate donor relations at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington DC, England, and of necessity the English language, have become associated first with British hegemony and now with American hegemony. Foreigners often use English words to describe their most mechanical and least-liked activities and objects, such as the Big Mac.

I lived in Korea for two years, and noticed that Koreans butcher English with gleeful abandon. They call it Konglish, a dislike Konglish. I'm Korean-American, but I love the English language.

I have mixed feelings of allegiance and comfort, natural enough I suppose, to Korea and to America. As much as I have come to desire a better understanding of Korean culture and society, I feel like a lamb in the woods when I hear overtones of hostility in the butchering of American English, a language that was one familiar comfort to me in a largely foreign land.

Spencer Allen, language arts teacher in Jefferson City, Missouri, US: I've had debates against an entire class concerning the importance of English as the official language of the United States, which it currently is not. My opponents argue that by making English the official language, we are stifling another culture. I argue just the opposite: by NOT making English the official language, we are stifling the AMERICAN culture.

Of course, people are upset when their children or grandchildren lose a part of their cul-

ture; they should be. Similarly, parents are and should be somewhat upset when their daughter or son moves out of the house and marries. In both cases, something is lost, but theoretically, something greater is gained.

Even if English were a world-wide "official" language, it would not turn us into clones. Nor would cultures be bulldozed in the process. Rather, a wonderful thing happens: we learn to communicate in ways that help us grow into a united culture, where people are allowed more diversity than ever before because they see so many different ways of living life.

Geoffrey Keyworth, a systems engineer from Ottawa (Canada), living in Toyota-city, near Nagoya, Japan: The simple fact that I am living in a country which is considering adding English as a second national tongue (after Japanese, of course) means that I am often an unwitting ambassador for my native language.

I am frequently involved in conversations where, after some initial pleasantries, we talk about the differences between the two languages, and little else. It seems a strange thing to discuss over drinks, but it's so interesting that I rarely even notice.

Perhaps educators in English-speaking nations should consider that their students will likely travel, at least once in their lives, to a country where English is not the first language. What a shame it would be if the visitors proved unable to give a good account of themselves in their native tongue!

Elizabeth Glover, a text designer with a New York publishing company: I have taught English writing to college students from many nations. I think the loss of any polyglot ability is a tragedy. I have no facility with language other than English, and I wish I did. However, I strongly feel that parents should raise their children to have both their native tongue and the language of wherever they are raised.

I live in immigrant-heavy Queens, New York, and those who don't speak reasonably competent English are restricted to business dealings with their own ethnic group, possibly only within their own neighborhood. Perhaps this is all they want, but wouldn't it be nice to have other options?

I think English is in a period of flux, much as it was during the late Elizabethan era (there must be something about long-reigning queens named Elizabeth). Whether this is to the better or worse remains to be seen. One of the most beautiful aspects of English is its flexibility. We have endless synonyms for things, each with its own connotation. As any native English speaker can tell you, something HUGE is bigger than something merely BIG.

What kills me the most is that grammatical errors are often perpetrated not by foreigners, who could understandably be confused, but by Americans and perhaps Canadians and Brits as well. I suspect American TV and movies are the biggest culprits.

Ann H. Sakai, San Diego, California, US: I am Japanese-American and of course English is my first language. My grandparents came here in the early 1900s from Japan. My parents were born here. I was born in an American concentration camp during the war. I attended

Berkeley in the 1960s and earned my degree in Spanish (major) and French (minor). I taught Spanish for 25 years in Northern California.

I am working as a conversation coach with ESL students mostly from Japan. They are as curious about me as I am about them. I wonder if they think I actually speak standard English, being that I look like them. English is a very important language. People from all over the world come here to

learn English. I believe that the more people travel and learn each other's language, the closer we come to understanding one another.

The author is a retired journalist who spends much of his spare time surfing the Internet and writing about it. His articles have been published by leading newspapers including the New York Times (U.S.), the Toronto Globe and Mail (Canada), the Sydney Morning Herald (Australia).

Battle over 'Frankenstein' corn

Many Philippine farmers are mounting fierce resistance to government field trials of a strain of corn which has been modified to contain an insecticide. They fear it could damage the environment, health and their livelihoods. The dispute shows signs of getting out of hand, Michael Bengwayan reports from General Santos City, Philippines

THE Philippine government is pressing ahead with field trials of genetically modified corn, despite furious opposition from farmers and a scientific squabble over whether the crop is safe.

A mass demonstration by farmers last month ended in clashes with police. Now, some militant critics of the government-sponsored trials are said to be threatening to burn down fields of the crop known as BT-corn and even enlist left-wing rebels in their battle.

Opposition began to grow last year when a government regulatory body, The National Committee on Biosafety in the Philippines, gave the go-ahead for test plantings.

About 80 hectares were sown with BT-corn around General Santos City and Los Banos Laguna. The corn has been genetically modified so that it contains a toxin, isolated from a microbe, which kills corn borers - insect pests that can wipe out whole fields if left unchecked.

Opponents are worried that the plant might contaminate the environment, adversely affecting other living organisms. That its modified genetic makeup might be harmful to humans, and that it could eventually make small farmers dependent on high-priced seed from multinational companies.

Corn is the Philippines' second staple food after rice, and a sizeable proportion of the country's 75 million people depends on it. Farming organisations have petitioned the agriculture department, calling for a halt to the trials, but without success.

"BT-corn will enrich Mon Santo (the United States-based biotech company, assisting in the trials) at the expense of farmers," said Emmanuel Yap, executive director of Maspig, an umbrella organisation of various farming groups representing about 2.2 million members.

He said they had encountered disastrous consequences from other farming experiments, such as the introduction of the Amazonia golden snail to the Philippines in the Eighties. This was supposed to bring farmers a bountiful new source of protein, but the creature became a serious pest to rice grow-

ers, damaging up to a quarter of a million hectares of crop.

Environmentalists and consumer groups backing the farmers fear that the BT-corn's toxin will not break down and will get into the food chain. They believe it might cause health hazards, such as cancer, in humans.

However, objections to the trials were dismissed by the Philippine Agriculture Secretary, Edgardo Angara, who accused the local media of whipping up a "Frankenstein corn" scare.

He said, "Stopping BT-corn production would pose a danger to government agricultural research and development programmes because it would set a precedent."

His stand infuriated members of General Santos City council, who have tried to ban local trials of BT-corn. "He should conduct them in his own province, Quezon," said Councilor Dominador Lagare.

Mayor Adelbert Antonino pointed out, "The people, the farmers and the Church have spoken against BT-corn. The national government should heed its citizenry."

The trial programme is being led by Dr Reynaldo Ebor, director of the government's National Institute of Molecular Biology at the University of the Philippines, Los Banos (UPLB).

He stated, "I am determined to show farmers and other critics that the use of BT-corn will reduce dependence on pesticides, and that the possibility of passing on the deadly microorganism to humans is nil."

He added that the crop had been tested for allergenicity and toxicity, and had been shown to be very safe.

However, some of his colleagues do not seem so sure. In fact, Dr Romeo Quijano, head of the department of pharmacology at the University of the Philippines in Manila, has alerted parliament to his own worries that the toxin in BT-corn might be carcinogenic. He wants the field tests halted.

Quijano told a recent symposium, "The studies that conclude that BT-corn is safe are corporate-sponsored."

Unless independent scientific studies gave the corn a clean bill of health, he added, it should be considered toxic.

On commercials and product marketing

By Alif Zabr

LIKE you, I am also a prisoner of the local TV commercials; and, after sometime, the curvaceous gyrations and mirth-quotes leave you cold, not sweaty. The spots show more attractive faces and willowy shapes (not of the products), which are not sold in the shops, and the product you bring home do not do the things as proclaimed by the loudspeakers or the loudmouths.

I remember one advertisement in a glossy American magazine which said in small print at the bottom of the ad: "the model shown is not included in the offer". Fair enough, understood; but there is no fees for watching or listening! This is not a joke, but this is what I asked a salesperson who rang the doorbell at my residence to promote a product.

There you are, virtual reality (VR) at its best; and unreachable. If all the life's earnings could be translated into reality, life would not have been worth living. Over-saturation does not leave playing space (no harm in switching over to some philosophy over the cheap commercials).

Some premarital conditions are strange and tinny (as depicted on the screen of the idiot-box). Above the nuptial bed, the would-be bride must have that special brand of corrugated iron sheet over the head (regardless of the life insurance). That's an iron-clad condition, tin-plated to resist marital corrosion. The groom can buy her that super-white tooth paste, for that soothing grimace together with half a dozen brands of skin bleaches to make the skin whiter than nature intended (ensure that the clothes are not cleaner than the skin).

Skin-effects count in this society - watch our cosmetic politicians, who try to stop the sale of other products. They should undergo a course on political salesmanship. Sell in mini packs, not in huge containers of ideologies, which cannot be transported in the jam-packed streets.

As for the toilet and washing soap, the choice available in the market is bewildering. If in doubt, try the mini-pack first for a trial. This is specially a boon for the consumers in the lower income group, who can now try a famous product for three taka only, instead of spending seventy.

But the famous Dhaka

cheese comes in big balls costing around taka two hundred, absolutely outside the pocket of the middle-class gourmets, noting that the middle-class intellectuals are the engine of democracy (those who have the money do not have to think for themselves and for others).

Dhaka's mosquitoes must be laughing at the mosquito coil commercials. The coiled coil power evaporates in smoke, polluting the environment, and driving away the allergic and dear human members of the family from the room. As for the aerosol sprays, most cannot afford two taka per one-second squeeze. Watch the free aerobics on the screen, it is enjoyable, but afterwards can you honestly remember the name of the product? That is the problem, the medium becomes the message, and the advertiser pays for the product whose name cannot be remembered due to attractive diversions. By the way, our politics is similar.

Now the TV whiz kids are playing a new fondling game with the new machines called digital-effects generators/mixers. The DEGs encourage the finger-itching epidemic, and the viewers are the victims of the after-effects of the aerobic demos of the models and the products. Since technology is moving ahead of the short training modules, you can hardly read the small, fleeting captions on the screen. These are removed before the fastest readers in the world can go through the whole sentences, and the small typeface used is no tribute to the low-voltage lighting in Dhaka's drawing rooms. The point is simple: do not trust your over-enthusiasm on the hapless viewers; experiment elsewhere and come back with the finished product of the layout and animation.

Another nuisance is the repetition of the same 10-second commercial several times within 30-60 minutes. Have variations of a theme, and impose in small doses. Typical was a VW car advertisement "We make it simple". Most of the TV commercials are aimed at the higher levels of the society, with flashy cars and instant lifestyles, unsuitable for consumers with flowing ties and wallets tied somewhat closer.

Life depends on the stick - the lollipop with raspberry flavour, as my 6-year old niece prefers.

Taming 'Frankenstein' foods

- The Biosafety Protocol was agreed at a meeting in Colombia in February to regulate the trade in genetically modified products.
- Rules allow countries to ban imports of GM seeds, microbes, animals and crops they believe harmful to their environment
- Agreement also stipulates that all GM food must bear the label "may contain" before being shipped abroad
- Will come into effect when ratified by 50 countries
- Possible catch: A clause which says the pact will not override rights and obligations under other international agreements, including the World Trade Organization

concerns over possible genetic contamination of the environment. One of them, Dr Teodoro Mendoza, head of the UPLB's Institute of Plant Breeding, said he also believed that the corn borer would develop a resistance to BT-corn.

Meanwhile, a member of the regulatory National Committee on Biosafety in the Philippines has voiced concern that members acted in haste when they gave the green light last August for trials to begin.

"The NCBP rushed its decision to approve the field testing without looking at the safety issues," Roberto Verzola, a community representative on the committee, told Gemini News Service.

A legal challenge to the field tests suffered a blow when a petition to the Supreme Court, seeking a temporary restraining order, failed. However, non-governmental organisations backing the challenge have filed a motion for reconsideration.

Hostility to the trials came

to a head in General Santos City at a March conference - inaugurated by President Joseph Estrada - to discuss food issues on Mindanao island. More than 3,000 farmers protesting against BT-corn tried to storm lines of police. They were beaten back by baton-wielding officers, and two protesters were badly hurt.

Militant farmers are now threatening further protest, and there has been talk of destroying GM crops and seeking help from the New People's Army guerrillas, who have waged a 30-year Maoist insurgency in the Philippines.

One farmers' leader, Eswar Kuhlaj, said the government was acting in a high-handed manner, adding, "We are never consulted, even when our lives and future are at stake." - Gemini News

The author is a journalist specialising in environment and science. He writes for Today, the Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia and the Environmental News Network.