

For friendship Bangladesh should look East

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton, USA

BANGLADESH Foreign Minister Mr. M. Morshed Khan's "broadside" at India at for "unfair trade" practices at the session on India-Bangladesh Dialogue for Young Journalists was unusual for its brutal frankness and lack of diplomatic finesse. Coming on the heels of *The Statesman's* editorial on the August 21 carnage entitled, "Khaleda's game plan: Kill Hasina and banish democracy," these make Bangladeshis wonder how much of a true friend India is.

Bangladeshis have always acknowledged and will forever remain grateful to India for its crucial assistance during the nine months of Bangladesh's war of liberation in 1971, without which the liberation war would have taken much, much longer. But we would have prevailed. It does not take more than a cursory look at the predicament of the mighty US in Iraq to realise that a militarily weak and impoverished Pakistan would not have lasted in Bangladesh against a united nation for more than a few more months. We must also remember that at the most critical juncture in the history of our nation China and America opposed us. Only India and the USSR stood by our side. There is no way anyone should attempt to revise these truths about our liberation war.

Real charity is for its own sake. In one wants something in exchange

for charity, that kind of quid pro quo cancels charity. If India's ultimate aim was to subjugate Bangladesh, then its assistance during the liberation war was tainted. The world has to understand something about the Bangladeshi psyche: we cannot stand hegemony and domination. If we preferred servility, we would have stayed with Pakistan. Nothing unites Bangladeshis and ignites their passion faster than the threat of foreign interference and domination. India should get used to the fact that it does not own Bangladesh!

If I were an Indian, I would be fuming at the successive governments of India for transforming a very grateful friend, Bangladesh, into, if not an enemy, something next to it. Bangladeshis witnessed India's first unfriendly act when they saw right before their eyes Indian soldiers loading their trucks with civilian and military hardware the Pakistani POWs had left behind in cantonments and elsewhere. Our father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman embodied one of the finer attributes of the Bangladeshis, generosity. On a simple word from Indira Gandhi, in 1975 Sheikh Mujib ceded to India the Bangladeshi enclaves of Dahagram and Angarpota in a land exchange to make both the nations around Bangladesh more contiguous. Thirty years later, Bangladesh is yet to receive an equal slice of land from India as Indira had promised! We all

know how hard India fought us for the puny Tin Bigha. India is 22-times bigger than Bangladesh. Where is the big brother's reciprocity, let alone generosity?

Generosity makes a nation great. One reason for America's greatness is its generosity. Even after 9/11, America has kept its door open for immigrants of all colour, race, and religion, including Muslims. One

fifty years after independence is true, then clearly India is not generous to them or to us, and we should get used to it. Recently, in a television programme I saw scenes from present day Darjeeling which reminded me of Feni in the 1950s! Perhaps so much money is spent on internal security in India that not much is left for developing the Seven Sisters. Ask any Nepali and

started exporting batteries to India, an anti-dumping tariff was imposed to terminate it! India exports \$3 billion of goods to Bangladesh legally annually, and much more through smuggling through the porous borders, but is unwilling buy products made in Bangladesh. Based on broken promises of the past, it is difficult to accept India's assurance that it will

mies?

It was good of Mr. Joseph Cofer Black, the US State Department's coordinator for counter-terrorism to visit Bangladesh recently. He is most welcome. But it was a mistake to consult the India media and "get some good insights from the Indian team on what is going on in Bangladesh." Before "developing a position on it," Mr. Black should consult

leader of the opposition to express their condolences in the aftermath of August 21, in an unprecedented breach of protocol, the Indian Prime Minister called only our leader of the opposition!

It appears that a certain section of the Indian population is jealous of Bangladesh's success as an independent nation. In thirty-three years, Bangladesh has become a moderate Muslim majority nation with a thriving democracy led by two women. As the largest contributor to UN peace missions, Bangladesh is the world's number one peace-keeper and is respected worldwide for it. The President of the US, the Prime Minister of the UK, and heads of the government of many important nations have visited Bangladesh recently, and continue to do so. Bangladesh is the site of several international conferences every year. Dhaka and the rest of Bangladesh are developing at a breathtaking pace. On top of it, Bangladesh is a test cricket playing nation (currently not doing too well, admittedly). One can commiserate with those who believe that the unsophisticated "Bangals" should not be having so much success!

Bangladeshis have always wished India well and will continue

to do so. All we want in exchange is to be left in peace. Bangladesh cannot choose its enemies, but it can certainly try to choose its friends. Our near neighbours to the East -- Myanmar, Thailand, China, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia -- value and court our friendship. We should offer it to them. Instead of wasting time in SAARC, we should try to join ASEAN. After all, we have a border with Myanmar, which is a member of ASEAN in the making. People in America who know Bangladeshis comment on how generous they are. In my visits to Bangladesh I am always gratified by the generosity of not only friends and relatives, but also simple villagers. Perhaps this generosity is what is fueling Bangladesh's furious development. All of the ASEAN nations are also generous; that is why they have developed so fast. Being generous themselves, they appreciate our charitable attributes and want to be our friends. Bangladesh should associate with nations that cherish and share the same values it does.



LETTER FROM AMERICA

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cannot say that of Australia, for instance, which is comparable to America in terms of land mass and resources. Still clinging to a white Australia policy, it severely restricts non-white immigration, and consequently occupies one of the lowest rungs among the western nations! It is not for a Bangladeshi to comment on India's generosity or lack of it, but a Bangladeshi is free to cite an Indian source. If a fraction of what film director Mani Ratnam showed in the film *Dil Se* (starring Manisha Koirala and Shah Rukh Khan) about the repression of the people of the Seven Sisters of North-East India

he will tell you that India's interference is responsible for many of their problems.

As Mr. Morshed pointed out, for the people of the Seven Sisters, goods are 40 per cent cheaper to buy from Bangladesh than from Kolkata and beyond. In their peace treaties, there was a clause for free trade with Bangladesh, which has not been honoured. Instead India has imposed non-tariff barriers. For instance, if the seven north-eastern states want to buy cement from Chittagong, the central bank of India does not allow them to open a letter of credit for it. When Bangladeshis

not link its rivers and deprive Bangladesh of water in the dry season and flood Bangladesh during rainy season. Diplomatic sources say that the year before last, the BJP government campaigned actively for Bangladesh's inclusion in the list of terror-risk nations! India bogusly accuses Bangladesh of harbouring anti-Indian terrorist camps and turns a deaf ear when Bangladesh points out exactly where anti-Bangladeshi terrorist camps are located in India. Every other day, Indian border security forces kill 2 or 3 Bangladeshi civilians. With friends like these, who needs ene-

the Bangladesh government exclusively, and not inquire of an interested and anti-Bangladesh third party. Mr. Black should have known that he would hear nothing good about Bangladesh from the Indian press. For example, last month when Bangladeshis everywhere were grieving over the August 21 massacre, in an editorial *The Statesman* of Kolkata libelously a c c u s e d our current Prime Minister of attempted murder without offering any iota evidence! Unlike other heads of government who called both our Prime Minister and the

English: Looking for the lost language

DR. M. AMINUL ISLAM

THE worldwide importance of English is broadly acclaimed and is visibly manifested in various ways. The biggest part of the vast ocean of knowledge is preserved in English and is distributed across the globe in the form of books and journals, and more recently, through the internet. There has been an explosion of knowledge in science and technology and economic activities in the recent decades. As the epicenter of all these has been in US, most of the knowledge remains recorded in English. Before that, the epicenter was the UK. As a consequence most of the recent knowledge accumulated in the latter half of the modern age is preserved in English. The need for English has become even more important as the information age has begun to replace the modern age. At the dawn of the new millennium, as the age of communication and information replaces the modern age, the world has shrunk and has become a global village. This has culminated in a quantum leap in the importance and use of English as the common media of communication across the globe.

Recently Bangladesh has woken up to the understanding that she cannot play a proper role in the world arena unless she is strong in English. Like in other countries of the world, the importance and demand for English is felt deeply here in Bangladesh. Unfortunately the moment when the demand for English is so high, there persists a great weakness and a vacuum in English language in Bangladesh. Our utter weakness in English is an impediment to many activities, be it going abroad for higher studies or getting a job, communicating widely and effectively with foreign countries, entering the IT world, or developing the quality of higher education by extracting knowledge from the treasure of modern knowledge preserved in English. Unfortunately, a huge part of the educated population at present is almost incapable of writing, reading, and speaking English.

There was a time when Bangalees were well-known for their proficiency in English. One must wonder why there has been such a marked deterioration in the standard of English in Bangladesh. Immediately after the independence of Bangladesh, there was a euphoria regarding Bangla. While it was correctly identified that Bangladeshis as a nation will emerge stronger if they revived their love for Bangla and Bengali culture, English was wrongly and irrationally considered to be an adversary to Bangla. In fact, the step-motherly attitude to English cannot be a precondition for learning Bangla. Most of the people in our country do not know that there are many famous litterateurs and writers in Bangla who have their highest degrees in English. Some others are just as proficient in English as they are in Bangla. Due to the suicidal policies introduced during the post-independence era, Bangladesh has suffered a tremendous set back in terms of losing a tool of instruction that is so much needed.

As a teacher in a university, I am shocked to find that many students who are otherwise good in their subject, cannot write a single sentence in English correctly. Even the students who obtain good marks in English in their public examinations cannot write compositions independently. Most of the good books at the university level are written in English, but the students cannot read them. The condition of spoken English is worse still. What kind of English do they learn in the long

twelve years before coming to university? The students of Bangladesh generally memorise everything including grammar, composition, letters, applications, paragraphs, essays, and so on, and reproduce them in the examination. They never learn the language.

There are three main reasons behind the weakness of English among the students entering universities. Firstly, students do not

English teachers are needed. It is a gigantic and difficult task to teach all of them English and train them in teaching English. With the help of private initiative, foreign agencies, NGOs and government initiative, many English language centres may be established in order to produce efficient teachers in the primary and secondary levels. There can be coordinated and complementary crash pro-

view, Applied English Linguistics Departments may be opened in our universities.

In Dhaka and in other big cities in Bangladesh there has been sudden mushrooming of English coaching centres. These centres have their own courses and their own method of teaching. There is no quality control of teaching in these centres. The main aim of most of these centres is amassing money and

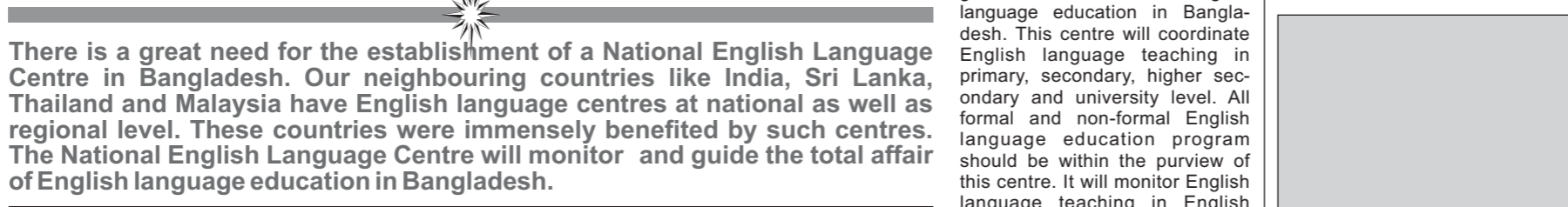
gladesh are praiseworthy.

There is a great need for the establishment of a National English Language Centre in Bangladesh. Our neighbouring countries like India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Malaysia have English language centres at national as well as regional level. These countries were immensely benefited by such centres. The National English Language Centre will monitor and guide the total affair of English language education in Bangladesh. This centre will coordinate English language teaching in primary, secondary, higher secondary and university level. All formal and non-formal English language education program should be within the purview of this centre. It will monitor English language teaching in English medium schools and private universities. Quality control of English teaching for each of the coaching centre will have to obtain approval of the national centre. This centre will produce books on English language teaching and training, develop best possible ways to learn English language, collect logistics and use relevant technologies. It will arrange training for trainers both home and abroad. The centre will build a bridge between the ministry of education or the government with all the relevant institutions. It will utilise all the media -- newspapers, radio centres, TV centres and the Internet to make people aware of all its activities. The regional centre and the language laboratories will be under this centre. The national centre will carry out research on English language teaching.

It is not easy to fill up the huge vacuum that has been created in the last three decades. There have been many writings, discussions, deliberation and seminars on this problem, but there has not been much progress in its alleviation. There are some academicians, administrators and intellectuals who have profound knowledge in English, vivid understanding of the problems faced by Bangla speaking people in learning

English and management and organisational capabilities. None the less it does not seem they can do anything separately. Rather the government can play a vital role in the transition from the present weak situation of English by bringing those people together for a single purpose.

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need English outside their class room in their real life nor do they need it in learning other subjects; as a result there is no practice of English. Secondly, although the English text books at the primary and secondary levels are reasonably good there is great dearth of teachers trained in teaching these books. Thirdly, the existing education and examination system in general and English education system in particular are far from being ideal.

There is a great dearth of English teachers in the primary and secondary schools. Firstly it is difficult to get teachers who know English well; secondly, most of them are not trained in teaching English. Most of the teachers are not trained from a Primary Training Institute (PTI) or a Teachers' Training College (TTC). A very few of the trained teachers are capable of teaching English. Emphasis should be given on training for learning and teaching English in PTI and TTCs. There are again dearth of trainers of English in these training centers. In order to produce capable master-trainers, people may be sent abroad for training. A strong team like this in turn can produce trainers within the country.

There are nearly one lakh primary schools and seventeen thousand secondary schools in Bangladesh. More than a lakh

grams in these centres. There is need for pressure, incentive, and motivation for this kind of training. If needed, teachers may take training at their own expense in order to enhance English teaching capability.

Until the stagnancy and inappropriateness in the pre-university education are removed, special steps should be taken in universities regarding this. There should be a compulsory English language course in all the departments in all the faculties in a university. The course and the methodology of its teaching should be such that the students can effectively learn the language. There may be set up an English Language Institute in each university, which can prepare the courses and the books, carry out research, supply the logistics and take the charge of teaching the courses. Alternatively a special English language cell may be created in the English department, which can shoulder similar responsibilities. In the Honours degree and Master's programmes of English in universities, the courses are basically literature-oriented, not language oriented. Our country, however, needs English language education. We need such graduates who will develop overall skill in reading, writing, listening and speaking English. With this end in

there is doubt about their good intention and sincerity. Most of the coaching centres are of low standard and these are not helpful for enhancing efficiency in English. Students think that a coaching centre is a quick fix and they almost invariably forget that unless they practice English outside the class room they cannot learn the language.

The present government since the assumption of power, has been emphasising English education for human resource development. Honourable Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia in her inaugural address to the nation after taking the charge this term, underscored the importance of English education. Since then in many speeches on different occasions, she has laid emphasis on learning English language. I was deeply impressed when I found her to remind the nation the importance of English for the progress of Bangladesh in this new millennium on an emotional day like the immortal Ekushey. That's what is called statesmanship -- the courage to tell the nation what is to be told for the sake of building the nation -- to lead the nation with steadfastness and vision. Many of the steps taken by the government to improve the English language scenario in Ban-

