Susan Gohs at LPC

'Literature helps one learn a language'

Syed Badrul Ahsan

YOUR first impression of Susan Forbes Gohs is of a shy, withdrawn woman who does not much like speaking of herself. But this reticence soon gives way to a pretty spirited response to any question you may be placing before her. She was here in Dhaka last week as a guest of the Language Proficiency Centre in Banani, the objective being to enlighten teachers here on the best practices employed in some American schools. As part of her programme in Bangladesh, Gohs visited Chittagong and Rajshahi and came away happy with the experience. She tells you that she was impressed by the level of thinking she noticed among the teachers she was brought in touch with. Was communication a problem, seeing that English does not happen to be widely spoken in Bangladesh and that the teachers she interacted with comprised largely men? Gohs pauses for a few seconds and then lets you know that communication between her and the teachers was more than okay.



Gohs, you should know, is a much travelled individual. She has been to China, Cuba, Spain, Italy and Mexico. When you ask her if she would like to be back in Bangladesh at some point, she lights up and whispers an eager 'yes'. Obviously it would have to do with the teaching of English. But where is the place of literature in all this preoccupation with language? For Gohs, the answer is emphatic: reading literature, reading fiction in fact, is or should be a mandatory part of a language course, for it is through literature that one earns to navigate through the nuances and subtleties of language. In simple terms, grammar comes to people best when they proceed through the many phases of literature. She gives you an instance of the kind of fiction she would recommend as a complement to the teaching of English as a language. It is Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. And then, to be sure, there are other works to be recommended. You think of Orwell's *Animal Farm*, off the top of your head. Or Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in A Boat*.

Susan Gohs, like many other visitors from the West, has been affected deeply by the degree of poverty she has noticed in Bangladesh. Besides, the density of population, the fact that the streets are always teeming with people, has made a deep impression on her. And yet she remains touched by the friendliness and hospitality she has come across during her visit. "I have never felt more welcome in my life', she says, with that twinkle in her eyes. And then she recalls the first time she heard of Bangladesh, in the very year of its struggle for liberation. It was 1971. She was a student. She was young. And she heard people talk of George Harrison's concert for Bangladesh in New York.

The Language Proficiency Centre, which sponsored Gohs' visit along with that of her colleague Shabbir Karim, has since 1998 been engaged in a promotion of English through a programme of focused teaching at various levels. With Javed Haider Karim, its director, and Syed Nazrul Ahsan, one of its deputy directors, as driving forces behind it, the LPC has achieved a reputation for consistency as well as innovation where imparting English as a foreign language to Bengalis is concerned. Its team of dedicated teachers operates along a system which combines standard patterns of teaching with the informal in dealing with students. Gohs is all appreciation for what the LPC has been doing. However, she also feels that it needs a lot more recognition than it has in order to disseminate the positivism it has come to be associated with.

Susan Forbes Gohs' career in education goes back twenty eight years. She graduated from Ohio University in 1976 with a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Development and spent the early period of her career on founding a child care centre for Dayco Corporation. She subsequently supervised the Head Start programme in Dayton, Ohio. The Head Start programme, it may be recalled, was initiated by the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s. After Ohio, Gohs moved on to Atlanta, Georgia, where she developed and implemented the English curriculum for primary school grades at the Atlanta International School, which represented 52 countries all across the world. At this point, she is based in California.

One last question was put to Gohs: Why should people in non-English speaking countries want to learn English? Her answer was to the point. English opens doors; and for those caught in a cycle of poverty, it is English that offers the dimensions that can lead people around the world to expanses of social progress and individual gain. In other words, knowing English means knowing how to come by jobs.

She may have a point there.