THE ENGLISH WE NEED

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(Translated from Kannada by M.E.B.)

One of the most important problems we are facing in this country today is that of language. The conflict of views is very intense, each being advanced with emphasis on one aspect—provincial, national, international, educational or cultural. Some assert that the first place should be given to the regional language; others claim that that language should have the highest place which is accepted as of national importance. There are a few others who argue that taking into consideration the fact that English has been the source of our knowledge of Science and Culture and that it is essential for purposes of international contacts, the pride of place should be given to this language.

This is an old problem. Gandhiji himself examined the question thoroughly and put before the country his well-reasoned decisions. Educationists, both Indian and foreign, have investigated this matter and have offered their suggestions. Many of our national leaders have on many occasions declared their impartial view. In fact, the question has gone beyond the realm of controversy and the time has come for taking a decision.

Briefly, the position may be summed up as follows: priority should be given to the regional language. The national language should rank next, because of its importance in the context of inter-provincial relations and the need for an efficient system of Central administration. Some internationally important language or languages should be made optional. The regional language should be adopted for provincial administration. It should also be the medium of instruction at all levels. It is hoped that this brief summary will be accepted by all.

When, however, the question of languages is discussed many people get upset because of certain mistaken notions; particularly acute is the distress of those who are brought up on the English language and literature. Those who imagine that they owe their material prosperity to the English language think that without it progress is impossible. Then there is the English scholar who is not well acquainted with the glory of our ancient literature; he believes that the abolition of English will plunge this country into the darkness of ignorance. Without going into the question whether such fears and doubts are justified we may well ask ourselves: what should be the position of English? How much of it should be given? How shall it be taught? To how many people should it be imparted: How shall we balance the claims of language and literature? These questions must be tackled first.

There are some people who jump to the conclusion that we intend to abolish English when it is suggested that the regional language
should have the first place and that it should be the medium of instruction. They look upon the advocates of the local languages as narrow-minded bigots opposed to the higher claims of education and culture. But it need not be repeated that even the most ardent admirer of the national or regional language does not want English to be driven out of this country. When we consider the greatness of the English language, the intellectual benefits which we have derived from it in this country, the contacts which it has helped to establish between India and the rest of the world, it must be said that to clamour for its expulsion is almost treason. There are no two opinions about the wisdom of retaining English in this country.

Now that it has been decided that English should remain with us we must specify the position it must occupy in our scheme of education. We should also define its scope and purpose.

English was introduced in this country mostly for political reasons. It was for a political end that it was made the official language and that almost everyone was compelled to learn it. It was once again for political considerations that many of our countrymen took to it; there was also an economic advantage in this. It must be confessed even now most people study it more or less for utilitarian purposes.

But today the political set-up is different. Free India has chosen another language for official purposes. So what is the position of English now? It should not be given up; but it cannot retain its former position. It is no longer a language for the many; it is a language meant for a few. From now on it is enough if we can merely read and understand it; it is not necessary that we should be compelled to make speeches in it or use it for writing. In view of this it must be said that the place assigned to it by Gandhiji is best: he said it should be optional. It would be disastrous if it is allowed to remain as the first language. It is the main cause of the frustration and sometimes defeatism that we find in the younger generation today. Even as the mind of our children is acquiring enough emotional and intellectual maturity, the boulder of this foreign tongue is dropped on them. They waste their time in laboriously re-learning elementary things which they have already learnt through their mother-tongue. Every parent who has cared to understand the difficulties of the child at school is familiar with the harrowing travails of the young pupil who is beginning to learn English. The new language seems to make every familiar thing forbidding. The young scholar may with great ease and perhaps with pleasure negotiate the most advanced and complicated literary work in the mother tongue but he dashes against the obdurate rock of incomprehensibility when he tries to read even simple books in English.

The situation is much worse now, because it is no longer possible to bestow upon the pupil the individual attention that is required when he studies a foreign language. High schools are springing up everywhere. Most often the staff consists of teachers ill-equipped to handle
English. Schools are overcrowded and the students come from cultural
groups which are much more varied now than before. Of course
individual attention in days of yore might have meant such unpleasant
measures as forcing the student to stand on the bench, boxing the ears,
flaying the poor scholar till he and the teacher were exhausted, dragooning
the pupil to learn things by heart without discrimination or judgement.
(However the most exquisite form of punishment in those days
was to force the pupil to lean like a chair against the wall, probably
to fill the absence of chairs in the poorly furnished schools!)

To many a pupil English is the leaky boat in which he has to
cross the stream of examinations. At every stage the kind examiner
does his best to avert complete tragedy by resorting to an academic
device known as ‘Gracing’. Thanks largely to the co-operation of
the authorities the student reaches the stage known as College Education.
Here greater obstacles arise in the already tortuous course and the
navigator is horrified to notice that his ramshackle boat is dangerously
poised on the edge of a waterfall. Great is the roar of the waters rolling
over the precipice, but greater still is the toll of lives drowned in the
depths below. Dismayed at the spectacle the bewildered youth gives
up the struggle and contents himself with the contemplation of the terri-
fic splendour of this murderous Niagara. The only consolation is
that he is not alone in this desperate predicament; a large number of his
friends are there to keep him company.

There are a number of elders looking at this spectacle from their
safe position on the shore. Their comment may be expressed thus:
‘Oh! these days boys are becoming dull and stupid. The standards
are fast going down!’ Then what is to be done? The remedy suggested
is very strange indeed. ‘Increase the load of English; increase the dosage
of Grammar pills!’ Well, what is the result? The story of gracing
repeats itself, if anything with greater generosity! (A friend used to say,
‘What a pity, so much Grace is wasted on such disgraceful cases!’).

Enough of this drama nay, tragedy. When English is served to all,
as it is being done now, it is bound to be diluted. Far better it is to
serve it solid to a select few, and that in large quantities.

We can divide those who learn English into two categories; those
who value the ‘linguistic’ aspect and others who prize literary values.
The first category must be made thoroughly familiar with the English
language. They must learn it so well as to be able to understand it,
to write in it, and to speak it. They must be the instruments for
linking us with the rest of the world in the literary, scientific and
cultural spheres. It is desirable that at the higher academic level
English should be the medium of instruction for this category since
deep and well-grounded scholarship is the aim.

Different is the case of those who learn English for its rich and well-
developed literature. What they require is not language but literature,
poetry, the heritage left by the great dramatists, philosophers, statesmen
and scientists. The quintessence of the culture created by these immortal spirits is a source of inspiration to thinking humanity. For the people who want to absorb this quintessence neither fluency of speech, nor competence in writing may be necessary. It is enough if they can merely read and understand the language. Therefore, if English is taught to them through the medium of the regional language, it can be absorbed more easily and quickly. It is only natural that a foreign language should be learnt through the medium of a native tongue and this practice is prevalent in many countries. This is so because the aim is not so much to acquire scholarship and skill in expression as to get at the essence of the literature written in the foreign language.

Our educational system was devised by our former rulers purely for their convenience and therefore we were forced to learn their literature through their language. The benefits that we have derived from our study of English literature would have been immeasurably greater if we had learnt it through our language. The present system has so distorted the perspective of pedagogues that they are horrified when the suggestion is made that Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth could be taught through Kannada. But those of us who have been students in our colleges and after graduation have become teachers in the same institutions know better. We are heart-broken when we observe the limited capacity of our students to appreciate English literature and their still more limited power of expression.

What is the fate of the student, who does not know how to express himself in the English language when he ‘unexpectedly’ encounters the examination question: ‘Discuss the character of Macbeth?’ If there is no essay prepared by a more literate hand before the examination, the poor fellow is really lost. Can it really be claimed that such a student has understood the essence of Shakespearean Drama? His head may be bursting with ideas, but poverty of expression chokes them off. There is no doubt that he would do better if he is allowed to use his own language. Perhaps the main reason for the failure of a large number of students in the non-language subjects is the fact that English is used for instruction and examination; the toughness of the subject or the low I.Q. of the student may not have much to do with it.

We should give the first place to Kannada. English could be the second language for the present. Among the three papers reserved for the first language (i.e. Kannada) one paper should be exclusively set apart for English literature. Both the teaching and the examining should be in Kannada. If this is done English will cease to be the big burden it seems to be today; our students will be able to understand it better because they will enjoy it all the more.

One more assurance may be given to those who are alarmed when these suggestions are made. English will not disappear from this country completely. It will remain as Literature with many people;
a few will study it for its linguistic value. No harm will be done to the intellectual or spiritual development of any one. It must be realised that the position of Kannada is not so deplorable as it was twenty or thirty years ago. Many Kannada books dealing with a large variety of subjects have been written in recent years, to acquaint people with the advances made in various branches of knowledge. One need not depend only on English books for technical lore. Some of the literary works in Kannada surpass their counterparts in English. The beauties and excellences of Kannada literature are in no way inferior to those found in any other literature of the world. Some people in authority may still think of Kannada in terms of the gloomy affair that it was reduced to by underpaid teachers working in ill-equipped schools years ago. Let there be no doubt about the potentialities of Kannada. Much has been done and what has been done is an inspiring promise of what it is capable of doing.

To cease the absolute in shapes that pass,
To feel the eternal’s touch in time-made things
This is the law of all perfection here.
A fragment here is caught of heaven’s design;
Else could we never hope for greater life
And ecstasy and glory could not be.

SRI AUROBINDO
(Savitri—Book 2—Canto II)