

ENGLISH – THE GLOBAL LANGUAGE OF INTEGRATION

There is a feverish desire to gain something of global significance amongst at least 175 million people in China. And that is not global business acumen but something that would offer them fresh insights and a window of opportunity to compete at a different league – yes, these 175 million people in China alone are now studying English. And more have got the 'English bug'. In neighboring South Korea, authorities have set up at least 10 "English Villages" – mock Western communities with post offices, pharmacies and the like where kids [and adults] can practice their English language skills.

Globally an estimated 2.5 billion people are studying English in 2015, according to a British Council report. From Brussels to Beijing then, English is now **THE** common language spoken in multinational firms, top universities and the scientific community. "Any nation that ignores English learning does so at its peril" says James Oladejo, an expert in language acquisition at Taiwan's National University. Adding to this assertion, "English will remain the dominant global language for at least the next 100 years because of its pre-eminent position as the language of science, technology, tourism, entertainment and the media," says another expert, David Nunan of Hong Kong.[source: *Newsweek*]

When India gained independence, the story goes that one journalist had posed a rhetorical question at the then first local PM Mr Nehru – "Sir, now that India is free from British domination, which language would you choose as India's language of administration – which of the many languages of India?". "Good question, young man" PM Nehru replied, "But do you mind asking me this same question fifty years from now – as for the present English would suffice." Mr Nehru was a statesman. He did not sway to the dictates of the rabble.

Today, at least 500 Million of Indians speak English. And this number is expanding by the day. No wonder then India is **the** capital of outsourcing!

From Nehru to Lee Kuan Yew – that pragmatic leader par excellence who transformed what was once a poor, decrepit colony into a shining, rich and modern world-class metropolis had one thing in common: they both realized the value of English and the fact that English served as a catalyst for integration. In this context let me refer to a recent newspaper article under the caption: **"Choosing English brought success to Singapore, says Lee"** The article goes on to quote Mr Lee, "The mistakes of Sri Lanka and other newly independent 'failed states' made Singapore go in a different direction....."In 1965 we had 20 years of examples of failed states. So we knew what to avoid – racial conflict, linguistic strife, religious conflict. We saw Ceylon"....."**the team that ran Singapore made a deliberate decision to use English as a working language** and not focus on Chinese [in spite of the fact that Mr Lee Kuan Yew himself was Chinese!] At the time Singapore had Chinese, Malay and Indian schools in separate language mediums – like In Sri Lanka.

"Had we chosen Chinese which was our majority language, we would have perished economically and politically", Mr. Lee Kuan Yew emphasized. "Riots – we've seen Sri Lanka, when they switched from English to Sinhalese...."We chose English – we didn't say it was our national language – we said it was our working language – that everybody learns English" words of the visionary realist, Mr Lee.

Sadly our once peaceful island that promised so much is **still** [hopefully not for long!] wallowing in the quagmire of poverty, ignorance, disease and ever lurching in a downward spiraling economy, principally due to corruption at all unimaginable levels and scales, courtesy of unprincipled so-called leaders. These 'leaders' Sri Lanka is unfortunately saddled with display their absolute ignorance each time they open their garrulous mouths. They chose to discard English for reasons of sheer political expediency – to pander to the 'majority' 70% - to ensure their votes – at least in the short term – how tragically disastrous this has proved 50 years ago. It still is. Won't we ever learn: to continue with the SAME moronic buffoonery?

2010 was declared 'Year of English'. Then Minister SBD declared that all must sit for their A/L in English in 6 years time! In the meantime, our parliament is mostly a cacophony of empty prattle – in the vernacular. English is mostly still unseen in Government Departments. Even official Notices are in Sinhala or Tamil. So English – sought after by the rest of the pragmatic world is being regressively relegated to a language of least significance – at least where the State of Sri Lanka is concerned.

Yet, don't we see a mad scramble by those parents who could hardly converse in English, but rich enough to afford private, so-called International Schools jostling with each fellow parent to get their progeny educated in English? They know what is 'good' for their kids. They would not bite any politician's gibberish – again - that we should study all our subjects ONLY in Sinhala. At least let us follow the Philippines – the Government there mandated in 2003 that English be the medium of instruction for math and science beginning in the third grade, and for all subjects in secondary school. Sri Lanka, we PLEAD, please take note!

Even a housemaid who aspires to secure a job outside Sri Lanka knows the value of acquiring English – she would be better paid if she speaks English! When a 12 year old Chinese girl, who had studied English was asked the question why she chose to do, she replied in plain English, ***"Without English you are deaf and blind – now I learn new things every minute – thanks to English."***

If only our politicians acted like statesmen [and not as devious, designing politicians synonymous with expediency] and continued with English like what Nehru and Lee Kuan Yew did, perhaps we would not have been compartmentalized and polarized as two different people, suspicious of each other.

Ideally the Sinhalese should learn Tamil and Tamils should learn Sinhala. But both Sinhala and Tamil people MUST learn English - regardless of race or religion then ALL of us humans would understand each other better. If there were no separate medium of instruction for Sinhala, Tamils and Moslem... if all had ONE medium of instruction – English, would there have been such racial hatred? I wonder....

Maybe in the next few decades when reality finally 'hits' Sri Lankans, when the rest of the world treats us as lepers and poverty stricken beggars, then perhaps we would remove those imaginary chains of oppression that have stifled our obvious potential.

Let us jettison that awful word 'Race' and move on forward as ONE people. One Sri Lanka, speaking English as One; enlightenment is then not far off!

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