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A tool to mind your language

- Kaleidoscope



Moon Moon Sen and Ian Jack at a discussion on English hosted by British Council at The Bengal Club. Pictures by Arnab Mondal

British Council launched Aptis for Teens, an online English language proficiency assessment tool for students aged 13 to 17, earlier this month.

"It is an affordable, flexible and adaptable English language proficiency test for teens to assess their ability in speaking, listening, read and writing," said Sujata Sen, the director (East India) of British Council.

To mark the launch of the tool, British Council hosted a panel discussion at The Bengal Club on whether English is only a status symbol in modern India. The speakers comprised a Scotsman with a serious funny bone, an actress who impressed directors with her fluency in English and an Indian who grew up in England, among others.

That the talk was being held at a social club was in itself an irony, pointed out Roopen Roy, the managing director of Deloitte Consulting, at the start of the discussion, moderated by Debanjan Chakrabarti of British Council.

To a Scot, English comes naturally, said journalist-writer Ian Jack. "But I am lucky to have English as my native language, given it is now a world language. I was taught to speak English properly. My accent diminished as I started living in London," said *The Guardian* columnist.

Though Jack negated the importance of the right accent - "as long as your English is clear and grammatically right, it is okay" - actress-MP Moon Moon Sen felt speaking English the "right way" was still a status symbol and accent mattered. "Directors and producers would be in awe of me as I spoke the language well," she said. But

she still can't accept her daughters Riya and Raima's "Americanised" language, she added.

Sreeradha Dutta, the director of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, and Roy held a less conservative view. "With IT and globalisation, English has become far more functional. The difference between the urban and non-urban has blurred," Dutta said.

"To a niche crowd, English remains a status symbol. But with the IT revolution, English is actually very Indianised now. Not a status symbol at all," Roy said.

Rajeev Bakshi, the academic manager for British Council's English Language Centre in Calcutta, spoke from the perspective of an Indian growing up in England. "The English spoken by many Indians here is far more beautiful than mine. It smacks of prosperity. Hearing them I wish I had enjoyed a privileged growing up experience as theirs. I feel I have missed out. It is indeed a status symbol here," he said.

Page to screen

There are frequent cases of great books becoming bad films, while all too often mediocre or bad books have become great films. Antonio Monda, a professor of films at New York University, was discussing the relation between books and films at The Asiatic Society for a programme organised in association with the NGO Freed as part of an international series of events titled *Water's Friends*, hosted in great cities situated on riversides.

Monda picked *The Godfather* as an example of the second kind, and pointed to how by popular consensus the credit for the film's success goes to lead actor Marlon Brando and Francis Ford Coppola, the director, producer and screenwriter.

"But two fundamental aspects that make for a good film are present in Mario Puzo's book - a great plot and great characters. The same is true of Stephen King. They may not be revered as high literature but think of the number of great films based on his works. Rob Reiner's *Misery*, for example."

Discussing the strengths of each form, he pointed out that the word "cinema" etymologically draws from the Greek word for motion, "kinima". "Every image in a motion picture awaits the next image. Therefore, the ultimate cinematic moment is the chase. You'll never be able to capture that in a book or in a painting."

On the other hand, matters of the mind are easier explained in words. "Why is Fyodor Dostoevsky difficult to adapt for the screen? Because it is all happening inside."

Asked to name a good book that became a good film, he named two - *The Leopard* written by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa and directed by Luchino Visconti and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* which was made into a film by James Ivory.

Monda, who has written 10 books himself, is now writing 10 more, one for each decade of the last century, set in New York. The story set in the 1960s, for instance, would have in the background release of films like *Lawrence of Arabia* and *West Side Story*, Andy Warhol starting to paint and Bob Dylan ruling the charts.

The Buddha mystery



Jawhar Sircar at the sixth Kripasaran Memorial Lecture. (Sanat Kumar Sinha)

Jawhar Sircar traced the journey of Buddhism in India at the sixth Kripasaran Memorial Lecture presented by the Bengal Buddhist Association at its Temple Street headquarters last month.

The Prasar Bharati CEO and former secretary of the ministry of culture raised questions like how Buddhism had disappeared from India's historical landscape a thousand years ago and why the mighty stupas at Sarnath and Sanchi, the ancient universities of Taxila and Nalanda, have been neglected for centuries.

In a talk titled 'How Buddhism was rediscovered in modern India', Sircar traced the discovery of major monuments by the British.

"When officers of the Madras Army stumbled upon some caves in the Bombay Presidency in 1819 no one could recall its name. So the site was named after the nearest village, Ajanta," Sircar said.

Chinese travel accounts and references in ancient Indian texts helped Alexander Cunningham, the first director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to rediscover the Sanchi Stupa in 1851 and Bodhgaya in 1861. Between 1862 and 1863, Cunningham identified Ramnagar as the Ahich-chatra; Kosam as the great Kausambi and Sahet Mahet as the historic Sravasti. In true imperial style, Cunningham uprooted several stone carvings, and transported them to Calcutta's Indian Museum.

Sircar ended his talk with an invitation to solve the "major mystery" of collective amnesia regarding the Buddha, his contribution, and all major Buddhist monuments and art for a thousand year.

Scholar and writer Nayanjot Lahiri however, argued that to state that everything about the Buddha and about major Buddhist monuments and art was almost forgotten "for a thousand years" runs a risk....

"Buddhism did not completely disappear from the subcontinent. There is a longer, continuous and continuing Buddhist tradition in the western Himalayas, especially in areas like Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti. Of course, compared to its visible and widespread presence and influence in early historic India, Buddhism did witness a discernible marginalisation in the subcontinent from the seventh century onwards," he said.

Japan lessons

After New Alipore and Salt Lake, Japan-based Kumon Learning Centre has opened its third outlet in Calcutta on Elgin Road. With branches all over the world and in India, the after-school learning centres admit children from nursery to high school. Students here get to solve math and English worksheets designed in Japan.

"These classroom learning programmes sharpen a child's problem-solving skills and scientific knowledge," said Rashmi Singhal, the centre head of the Elgin Road branch.



Aditi Dey, the principal of Shri Shikshayatan College, and G.K. Khaitan, the president of the governing body, release a publication to mark the institution's diamond jubilee. Picture by Arnab Mondal

Contributed by Chandreyee Ghose, Sudeshna Banerjee and Sebanti Sarkar