

OF MICE AND MEN

By Hafizur Rahman

CERTAIN newspapers are doing much to keep interest in the English language alive in Pakistan. During the last few years quite a few new English dailies have started publication, while one was nipped in the bud by the defunct Press & Publications Ordinance.

Not that the late PPO was against English. No. How could it be? It was itself in English (as is its successor law) having been born in that language. I believe an Urdu translation was once mooted but could not see the light of day.

But it is hard going for English even with so many daily and weekly newspapers around, and with the daily business of government being conducted in English. I wrote some time ago about successive governments expressing their hypocritical love for Urdu and just leaving it at that.

I won't make the usual trite statement about the standard of English going down, but the fact is that our acquaintance with idiomatic English (colloquial is a far cry) is now wearing thin. But that does not prevent us from inventing new idioms (and even colloquialisms where knowledge of basic English is deficient) and using them in our writings.

Take the following bits from a story circulated by a news agency

Dawn
17/12

some time ago. It's a real gem: "The political authorities (in Peshawar) have arrested a virgin spy on the Pak-Afghan border..." and "The Indian secret agency RAW has been sending spy virgins to Pakistan for terrorist activities..." and "Earlier two virgins were arrested who were black-listed by the political authorities."

A whole book could be written on the contents of this story and the various connotations of the word "virgin" contained in it. But what a pity that the English newspaper took no notice of this bizarre use of the word, apart from just publishing the item as a news report. No eyebrows were amusingly raised and no merry chuckles heard. Again, nobody was reported to have pulled their hair in despair, nor was a case of rape of the English language registered with the police.

Although the item is absolutely beyond comment, and I don't want to invite the odium of prudish readers by becoming risqué or by indulging in innuendo, I must say I enjoyed the bit about the two virgins being black-listed. I wish the news agency had told us whether by black-listing them the authorities had barred their future operations as spies or as virgins. This much at least we deserved to be told.

I had no intention of turning today's piece into a glossary of howlers, but since a couple of inventive uses of English syntax and construction are pushing at the lid of the memory box to come out into the open, I may be excused the frivolity.

Some six months ago an English daily of Islamabad said that on Eid day the President stood for many

Poor English

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hours meeting people "without smacking at the sheer physical effort." I have no idea what the reporter meant. Neither did the President, I'm sure. The (former) President is a polite gentleman, but one really felt like smacking the reporter and then asking him, "Did you get that?"

As a votary of English I am conscious of the limitations to which it subjects the poor student from the *desi* school whose family background also is far removed from contact with English. But that is an anomaly for the educationists to resolve. Meantime we continue to see them adopting new ways of expressing themselves in an alien medium.

For example, what would you say to the press release from a District Information Officer which said, "Admissions to classes in the local government college will open on Saturday. Expired students can also apply." As an old member of the Information Department I was able to get to him on telephone. He told me that expired students meant failed students.

It is an old story but worth retelling, for it illustrates the oddity of the compulsive use of English in day-to-day office work. A friend in Radio Pakistan, in charge of the rural programme, once asked the great Roshan Ara Begum to sing a *dholak ka geet* in his programme. (I swear this is true, he was like that).

When the Malika-i-Mauseeqi indignantly refused, and also insulted him in the bargain, he reported her to the boss in the following words: "I asked Roshan Ara Begum to sing *dholak ka geet*. I again and

again requested her as above, but she, so to say, ordered me not to sing *dholak ka geet*."

What he meant was, as he later explained to us in Punjabi, that she was rude and peremptory in her refusal. Whatever the standard of his English he certainly tried his best to make his meaning clear.

I know it is unsporting and rather mean to laugh at mistakes of English committed by matriculate junior clerks and the like. But when graduates and M.A.s are not able to write two straight lines in the official language, and a four-line leave application contains half a dozen bloomers, there is cause to sit up and take notice.

What would you say, for instance, to this single line from a leave application written by the librarian in the office where I once worked? Begging for a day's casual leave he said, "My late mother is observing her *chehlum* on Thurs day..."

Maybe we should give thought to improving the method of teaching English, or maybe we should leave things as they are. Daily newspapers cannot be the sole means of keeping the language alive, though severely mauled, in this country. A Japanese industrialist once said to me, "We in Japan envy you Pakistanis for one thing in which you are ahead of us." I nearly passed out with surprise. "What is that?" I asked. "English," he said. "You people know English and can speak it. It's a very great advantage."

Could there be a more forceful argument in favour of retaining the international language and doing something to improve its learning and its use?