Study material for Semester IV, Alternative English ( General course)

ON IDLENESS by Samuel Johnson

In his essay *On Idleness*, Samuel Johnson talks about the common human vice of idleness, its nature, how people indulge in it and how it is disguised. Some moralists consider pride to be greatest of human vices, which is present in a majority of people and manifested in a variety of forms. Pride like idleness is also disguised by many, but without success, because like the moon it shines brightly but at the same time it is not bright enough.

Some idle people regard idleness to be an asset and boast that they have nothing to do. Since they sleep off most of their life, they find no difference between the day and night. They hang up their windows with double curtains so that the sunlight does not disturb their slumber.

Johnson describes the idle person as one who wears a garland of poppies (the fragrance of the poppy flower puts one to sleep) and drinks from the cup of forgetfulness. Idle people, whose bodies and brains are inactive, are in a constant state of stupidity. When they die, people say that they have stopped breathing. Life for an idle person is as good as death.

The positive aspect of idleness is that it is harmless to others and also that it requires no gratification from others, the way pride does. It has a silent and peaceful quality without causing envy, hatred or fear in others. Idleness is often disguised by turbulence and hurry, just as pride is sometimes covered up by humility. Idle people are however anxious to show others and also prove to themselves that they are busy. But the kind of work they indulge in, is not beneficial either to themselves or to others. They are always in a state of preparation, like making plans and resolutions and accumulating materials. Their tools and paraphernalia are never handy and their devotion and diligence to work are lamentably lacking. They are eager to occupy their hours with useless activities but not with sincere labour that has far reaching effects.

Johnson cites the example of his friend Sober, who fits into this category of idle people, who indulges in useless activities. Sober’s chief pleasure is conversation. But when his friends cannot offer him company, he takes up the activities of a carpenter, shoe-maker, tin-man, plumber and potter. When he has failed in all these pursuits he took up a new interest in Chemistry. He lights a furnace in the laboratory and distills fluids. Such activities are trifle and worthless, because they are carried out to disguise his chief vice –which is idleness.