

The Unfulfilled Amar Ekush*

Amar Ekush does not just come back one day every year; it has become a constant and integral part of our national consciousness. It is as it were an eternal spirit which was ‘born’ amidst us on a 21st February, and has become the core of our national identity, our deepest and highest national personality, a personality which is sometimes awake and sometimes resting but always alive. On the 21st February we celebrate the day of birth of this spirit amongst us, embrace it to know ourselves anew, to dream anew of what we want to be as a nation.

The heart of this spirit is our language and our culture. The thirst for expressing ourselves through our own language and culture. The resolve to remove all barriers in the way of their fullest expression. The instrument of this expression is not a set of alphabets only, nor just to sing the *Baul-kirtan Rabindra-and-Nazrul* sangeets. A nation’s language and culture are expressed through each of its daily deeds. The diverse ways in which a nation expresses itself through every deed that it does, in various diverse roles, in various diverse fields, are all different ways in which the nation speaks; the style and aesthetic quality of all such deeds are different expressions of its culture – its music, its rhythm, its poetry, its arts, are all embodies in the daily life’s movements of a nation.

Amar Ekush was born out of great pain. The immediate onslaught which gave birth to *Amar Ekush* was formally targeted upon the Bengali language and upon our language-based culture; but the objective of the onslaught was deeper – the objective was to deny us our right of national self-expression and to subjugate us as a nation. We know that this onslaught came as a master strategy of a conspiracy to use our economy as a colony to establish political social and cultural domination over us to serve the vested interests of another nation. This is why our language movement also was

not a movement merely to establish our right to speak our vernacular language but merged organically with our struggle for economic and social self-determination. “ora amar mukher katha kaira nite chay” (“they want to snatch away the word of our mouth”)—this call was much deeper than a call merely to protect the language of a set of alphabets and a culture based on such language. That is why the movement did not stop even after establishing Bangla as a national language of the then Pakistan. Our language movement marched on and turned into a movement for self-determination and united with our eventual struggle for independence.

But even after independence *Amar Ekush* is still alive, seemingly restless, as if unfulfilled. commemorating this day every year is not merely a remembrance for us, not merely paying homage to the martyrs of 21st February – it seems that *Amar Ekush* is demanding as it were, every year and throughout each year, the final fulfillment of its birth and is denying us peace until this fulfillment is achieved. *Amar Ekush* is questioning incessantly where is it that we are heading as a nation, how are we expressing ourselves as a nation, what is the language of our national life today, what is the culture of our national life that we are presenting to the world. Are we expressing ourselves as a nation as we had wanted to be – are we presenting our best persona to the world?

A broad direction for national self-expression had emerged through our struggle for self-determination and independence when four ‘pillars’ of national construction got adopted by wide national consensus. The pillars were not all defined very precisely.

Secularism is perhaps generally well understood. That *democracy* ordains voting by the ballot is also perhaps well agreed; but it may not be disputed that this ensures democracy only in a formal, ‘western’ sense and does not ensure real rule by the people as the underlying social philosophy is. On the meanings of *nationalism* and *socialism* there are no end of controversies. However, a general direction for national construction had been inspired by

these four pillars however imprecisely defined some of these have been, and the mandate for this had indeed been obtained through ballot-box democracy itself. It is pertinent to note that at that time the degree of economic inequalities in the society, and social inequalities resulting therefrom, were far less than in most non-socialist countries: we did not have the ‘twenty two families’, and political power in the country had rested in a section of the middle class rather than in an upper class in the society. Hence, however imprecise the notion of socialism had been, it may be surmised that the dominant social trends at that time did not perhaps have a vision of great inequalities as a trait of national self-expression.

New elements were added to the aspiration for national self-expression when in 1971 our struggle for self-determination turned into a struggle for national independence and crystallized into a people’s war of liberation. The war of liberation forged a unity of souls between a section of the middle class and the ordinary people, through the concrete experience of fighting together for liberation, living a life of great hardship and struggle together every day, a life of hardship and yet one inspired by a shared spirit; this extraordinary experience brought in the consciousness of many who participated in this, a fundamental transformation. This transformation related socialism more closely with egalitarianism, envisaged the practical processes of socialist construction as an articulation of people’s collective development initiatives, and dreamt of nation-building as a united effort of the middle class and the ordinary people in solidarity, hand-in-hand and shoulder-to-shoulder. After independence this trend in the struggle kept demanding from the political leadership the adoption of this path to national construction; at the same time those who could do so started taking initiatives for collective development efforts in different parts of the country and thereby sowed the seeds of a new style of social effort for progress [see Rahman, 19...]. In such diverse initiatives countless members of the middle class from all walks of life had their contributions – professionals, government

servants, teachers, journalists, students, and of course the youth in general. The transformation had even touched elements within the armed forces, so much so that a trend from these forces had stepped into villages after independence to plough the fields and had come to be known as the '*plough soldiers*'. Spontaneous as these initiatives were they had many inadequacies in them. But they represented urges and values of collective solidarity and self-reliance to move forward without waiting for resources to come from outside, values of hard work and sharing rather than choosing a path of personal luxuries, of giving manual labour for nation-building notwithstanding one's personal economic or social status, and to work in living fellowship with the ordinary people instead of looking down upon them as socially inferior beings. In such initiatives there was a thirst for innovation and creativity leaving conventional routine styles behind, there was a sense of national self-respect, a sense of pride in collective engagement to solve problems and move forward together through hard work and shared effort. This self-proud collective creativity in a shared effort and struggle was, indeed, the language and culture of the national-building efforts of these initiatives. These many novel initiative had together in them a language and culture which could but be fulfilling to *Amar Ekush*. And these were one of the highest expression of '*Muktijuddher Chetona*' (*the* "consciousness of the liberation war").

Unfortunately, these vibrations did not awaken in everybody in the society. It may perhaps be said that even among those who provided political leadership in the liberation war there were many whom this vibration did not touch. What is worse, many among such elements perhaps did not even understand this transformation of values and urges that had happened to so many in the society through the liberation war. Hence there was an effort to pull the society back to the conditions and values of pre-25th March ignoring this transformation, an effort which sought to retain the old social and administrative structures and cultures rather than

exploring new ones in order to move forward, not backward, from the processes of the nine months of liberation war. It goes without saying that these pre-25 March structures and styles were legacies of our colonial heritage and were unfit for taking any independent nation forward not to speak of a nation which had been born out of nine months of a people's liberation war. But it was fated that after a brief period of tug-of-war it was the old that emerged as the victor, and the society's urges and efforts for a path of creative self-mobilization for nation-building gradually faded away or got 'co-opted' in a hostile environment that was presided over by the old-style social and administrative structures which reconsolidated their hold over society in well-calculated sure steps. In the end, we have still recorded considerable advancement in our language and culture in technical senses and this undeniably includes many creative accomplishments, but the overall personality of the nation has unfolded in a different direction.

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We are a deeply divided nation today. The nation which during its struggle for self-determination and for independence had promised an egalitarian society is now characterized by sky-high inequalities. However imprecise the principle of socialism was, the recognition of this principle as a pillar national construction would have served as a resistance to excessive economic and social exploitation and inequalities within the society; this principle has now been reduced to impotence by a revision in the country's constitution without even consulting the people to whom the ultimate power is professed to rest in the same constitution. Today the principle of private individual interest is being proclaimed as the main driving force for development, this also without consulting the people. Thus invited, the pursuit of private interest has today gained such strength and momentum that the law-and-order machinery of the country has crumbled to enable this interest

to show and assert its most lustful and savage form without effective checks.

It is known that in such transformation of our socio-economic philosophy international vested interests have played an active role, and that to such interests the nation's political leaderships have surrendered one after another. It should go without saying that such coalition between external interests and national leaderships serve to promote external interests more than national development interests. It is known in the theory of economics that the 'free market' may serve social rather than only private interests only in a relatively egalitarian society in which no quarter will be able to use the market for its private gains by the strength of its private economic and social power. Short of this precondition the 'free market' does not ensure that social resources will be used for the overall good of the society; instead, it ensures that society's resources will be used to promote inequalities in the society further, and the society will experience distorted 'development' rather than healthy progress. We know that we are, indeed, experiencing such 'development' in our society.

This is, of course, typical of most countries of the south. These countries in the last three-to-four decades have received substantial amounts of foreign resources in the name of 'development assistance', but can hardly show much by way of development benefiting the wider society. On the one hand mass poverty has persisted unabated on the whole; on the other hand what has progressed decisively and alarmingly in these societies is the degree of inequalities. This has created in most of these countries an upper layer of society whose consumption styles are not in harmony with the overall state of development of their societies and are, moreover, heavily import-dependent. The demonstration of such ostentatious consumption standards are making the consumption patterns and aspirations of the rest of the society also move toward premature import-dependent ostentation. Unable to

pay for the desired imports with their own exports, these countries have gotten so dependent on so-called 'foreign assistance' that their rulers are submitting to any dictates by the donors on their domestic economic policies. Hence in almost all such countries today standardized economic reforms are being dictated by the donor countries and by international lending agencies controlled by the donors. This is a phenomenon perhaps without precedence in world history, i.e. different countries with different social and cultural heritages and with different socio-economic backgrounds and different stages of development are all swallowing the same 'pill' supposedly to mature into the 'developed' stage, all served by the same 'doctor'. It is being forgotten also that the donor countries themselves are not known to have taken this pill themselves to achieve their own 'maturity'. As a result, in most countries of the south the development scenario is in a state of utter confusion, and instead of healthy organic development of societies violent internal conflicts are using up their vital energies.

Bangladesh has also fallen into this trap very soon after its independence, and from then onwards there has been no effort by its leaders to lead a self-determined course of development. The way our economic policies are being dictated by external interests contains no glory worth a sovereign nation. Even with our formal status as an independent nation we are in effect a subjugated nation today. We speak our own language today only in the alphabetic sense while going on parroting what foreign interests are dictating that we should say. We do not talk of egalitarianism today because our masters frown at these words, even though this was one of the principles that inspired our vision of self-determination and independence and is still one of the principles enshrined in the nation's constitution. By democracy we understand only ballot-box voting whether it has any other content or not, taking pride even in that we have innovated the system of 'caretaker government' to ensure such democracy which otherwise would be violated by our political trends all so loyal to democracy, and even if the caretaker

government can only preside over a national process of choosing one set of ‘godfathers’ rather than another to take effective rule of the country and the country’s law in their own hands for the coming five years. Today the upper layers of the society have come to a state where the thought of living without foreign assistance has become a frightening thought, and to retain our credentials for continued foreign favours we have not hesitated to surrender our autonomy of thinking and action. Where is the glory of our language and culture in such subservience? Where is the glory of Bangla as our own language for which our people and our youth have struggled and died, if we are unable to think independently in this language? Have we not in all effect mortgaged our language, and hence the very soul of *Amar Ekush*, to foreign ‘money lenders’ for their material favours?

And what is the concern we have today for the ordinary people of our society whom we had mobilized to struggle and sacrifice to earn the right to speak our language and for our right to national self-determination? The ordinary people, to whom little of the immense foreign assistance we are getting is trickling down, whose labour and meager resources or their wants are their main strength in their struggle for survival, are still showing their creativity and against heavy odds. Our peasants not only constituted the bulk of the freedom fighters in 1971 and showed their courage patriotism and creativity in the liberation war; they have also over the years since independence brought the country close to food self-sufficiency confounding many predictions. This great glory is accompanied with an equally great shame, a shame that has hardly even touched our national awareness. The peasants are being rewarded for their economic feats, time and again, by the deadly kiss of the ‘free market’ which make them poorer for what they give to the nation, handing over the gains from their toils to unscrupulous profiteers of the rentier variety. As a nation we have not been disturbed by this inhuman response to what the peasants have been gifting us, and our rulers have not hesitated to take loud

credit for this achievement without even an expression of regret at how the peasants have been falling into greater poverty as a reward for their contribution to society. Certainly, if our rulers wanted it, agrarian reform to abolish rentier income from the rural economy so that incomes would accrue to producers and not to rentiers in the society, would not have been too difficult a proposition. But of course this is not part of the 'structural adjustment policy' package imposed by our foreign masters, and hence cannot be in the agenda of reforms of a sovereign nation!

3.

The principal obstacle today in the way of development of a positive national persona is the growth of economic and social inequalities to run-away proportions, and the associated separation between the nation's upper-to-middle classes and the ordinary people. In particular, it is the middle class which by virtue of its education and intellectual qualities leads social thinking of a nation. The unity that was forged during the liberation war between our middle class and the ordinary people through participation together in a joint struggle, had created a foundation upon which an organic process of national development and articulation of national personality could evolve; the creativity and spirit of hard work of the ordinary people could have been inspired by the continued association of the middle class which could have articulated a development philosophy based on the creative potentials of our people and on mutually enriching interaction between the middle class and the ordinary people. This unity is broken today. We are no longer willing today to sit on the same grass with the ordinary people although we did so in 1971; we ate with them from the same plate, slept together with them on the same floor. Today our peasants and our rural workers, devoid of opportunities to fulfil either their aspirations or their creativity and unable to bear the burden of life, are becoming uprooted by thousands from their indigenous lives every year to become slum

dwellers in the city. They are losing their language and culture as well in the process. This does not disturb us any more although this is such an affront to *Amar Ekush*. The middle class is no longer interested in arresting the devastation of the lives of our rural people and are not going to the village to help build the rural economy as an economy of promise and distributional values in order to keep the people there with their heritage, language and culture, working in the field with them as it had done in the aftermath of independence. Such respect for and sense of identity with physical labour have also disappeared from our students and from our youth as a part of the overall middle class culture to which they belong or aspire. This consciousness of the liberation war is no longer part of our consciousness today although we keep on loudly proclaiming our commitment to “*Muktijuddher Chetona*”.

This deep separation between the middle class and the ordinary people and its consolidation is the greatest defeat of the nation since its independence. Indeed, our very sense of national identity is as a result in a state of great crisis today. There are many questions on which the nation is divided today and on which national consensus is being desired; but solidarity between the middle class and the ordinary people as a social mobilization for nation-building is not even desired any more, and this puts into question any definition of nationalism about which the elite of the society are quarrelling today. Even leaving aside the moral aspect of this question it cannot be denied that without a sense of unity with the great bulk of our people whose joys should be our joys and whose pain should be our pain, we are rejecting the very spirit of nationhood. The elite of the society are quarrelling among themselves as to our national identity – whether we are first Bengali and then Muslim or the other way. But the question of national identity cannot be settled by arguments nor by verbal assertions – this question can only be settled by forging a living bond between the peoples of the nation who will hold hands

together sharing both joys and their pains. This is what makes a 'nation' truly a nation. This solidarity no longer exists among us today.

It is the absence of this solidarity which has enabled another sinister force to penetrate into the body of the society. There was no room for religious fundamentalism to enter and vitiate this body from the time of our language movement through our liberation war when national solidarity was strong and the nation was engaged in fighting for its right of self-determination. This virus got room to spread as this solidarity was abandoned by the upper layers of the society. When people in their hard struggle for life get the company and meaningful guidance from the educated and more successful in the society they do not need to go to uneducated fundamentalists for illiterate *fatwas*; from such company and support the people also get the strength to resist *fatwas*. But when people not only get devastated by oppression and exploitation but also become friendless, when they get cheated over and over again by the very educated classes to whom they look up for guidance, they naturally lose psychological strength to resist fundamentalism and even tend to embrace fatalism. Our people have trusted the educated in the society again and again, and have repeated been cheated. They have been promised an exploitation-free society; it is we intellectuals who have promised them that it is in the western style democracy that hope lies in their needs and aspirations to be attended to by their chosen representatives. Our people have always trusted us, have given lives to bring the ballot box democracy, to get very little themselves in return. Today we are prescribing yet another road for their salvation – the 'free market' road, and we know ourselves what this means for them. In effect the 'free market' principle is itself a *fatwa* of a fundamentalist nature devoid of any social welfare logic which the people are being asked to trust as a matter of blind faith. In reality the people are unable to see the fulfillment of their aspirations in this *fatwa*, returning as they are from the market only being robbed of the

fruits of their hard toil. It is not unnatural that the ordinary people being thus cheated by the educated, who are the torch-bearers of modern science itself, and by those whom they vote into power, submit to religious fundamentalism. The answer to this is not merely to condemn religious fundamentalism and call for closing down non-science-based education in the society, but to assure that faith in science and in analytical reasoning will be rewarded, and also to assure that the educated in the society trained in modern science are with the people in their struggle for emancipation and that the wisdom of science and analytical reasoning can truly uplift the lives of the people. If we cannot close the gap between ourselves and the ordinary people in this way, and offer them credible hope in the wisdom of science, if we cannot ourselves stop repeating the fundamentalist *fatwas* being delivered to us by our foreign masters aimed only to serve foreign vested interests, and if we cannot hold the people's hands to walk with them toward their emancipation, the field will remain wide open in the society for continuous spread of religious fundamentalism and ascendance of such fundamentalist power to make a serious bid to macro social power. There are, indeed, fears that we are pushing the nation in this direction. This is not just because the nation failed to take care of the '*rajakars*' after it got its independence; the rise of religious fundamentalism has a logic independent of the relation of such fundamentalists with liberation wars and whether they are tried or not for their war crimes, and this logic, I suggest, rests fundamentally on **the failure of science to be used for the emancipation of the ordinary people.**

Conclusion

To conclude, if we fail to reunite, and walk together hand-in-hand with our people, we shall slide downwards as a nation toward destruction. Currently we are going down rather fast. None other than the President of the State is reminding us of this downslide in his addresses to the nation one after another. The downslide cannot

be reversed by a mere complacency that we have today a political trend in power which had provided leadership in all our struggles for national self-determination, and had been with us when *Amar Ekush* was born. We should demand that this trend continue to provide the same kind of leadership for assertion of our national personality and not for submitting to the dictates of foreign interests for material favours from them. The path of asserting our national personality may not be an easy path to tread, but we thought we have a leadership now which has led the nation through unspeakably hard struggles in the past, and successfully.

We need, indeed, a national awakening today that we need a total change in our political and social culture. We need a leadership which will take inspiration from the spirit of *Amar Ekush*, lead us to speak our own minds in our own language, to think our own thoughts, to move forward in our own style, to build ourselves with what is positive in our own culture, meaning the totality of our own sense of best human values and our own sense of beauty. We need to resolve that we shall not present ourselves to the world as a poor nation with a hand extended for compassion and charity to outsiders promising that we should behave as the donors desire us to behave; that we shall present ourselves as a proud sovereign nation engaged in solving our problems and constructing our own national life and personality whether outsiders help us in this effort or not, a nation which even if very materially has proudly struggled and sacrificed much to achieve its right to self-rule at the call of *Amar Ekush* and will go on doing so. No nation in the world history has been able to show its creative best by calling itself poor and by identifying its poverty as the main problem to be solved, inviting the whole world to help overcome its poverty. And *Amar Ekush* urges that we show our creative and valiant best. This is why we have struggled in the past taking inspiration from *Amar Ekush*, to show that our language is capable of constructing the best thoughts, that our culture is capable of painting the most glorious vision of a nation marching forward, not backward, not

just in the race for ‘development’ but in human civilization. In a process of thus marching forward the nation’s material poverty will start shedding itself on its own. But above all, a nation which gets engaged in solving its problems with what it has, is never poor: it is full of a wealth of human richness, just as it was not a poor nation which had given birth to *Amar Ekush*, and it was not a poor nation which fought the liberation war of 1971 –it was a proud Bangali nation whom the whole world had admired.

If we cannot have this resolve in the 21st of February, then it is only a ritual that we are observing on this day every year. It is only a prayer for some departed martyrs at their graveyards. But as I said at the beginning, the soul of *Amar Ekush* is not a departed one: *Amar Ekush* was born amidst us on 21st February through pain as characterizes the process of birth itself, and it was born with a mission to accomplish, for which it created its own instrument through more pain and sacrifices in the form of the nation of Bangladesh. The language of *Amar Ekush* is the language of the nation’s highest personality, to be written not on a torn and crumbled page but on the page of national solidarity. By mortgaging this language to foreign ‘mahajans’ (‘money lenders’), dividing the country into rich and poor, into ‘Bengalis’ and ‘Muslims’, Muslims and Hindus and tribals, we are humiliating *Amar Ekush*, the very soul of our nationhood, beyond measure. We have got to recapture our language, liberate it from alien hold, in the sense of a language not merely of the mouth but in a deeper sense of a language of self-assertion. Failing this we shall be defeated, finally, this nation of fighters who have won great struggles through the language movement to national independence.

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