

মোদের গরব, মোদের অশ্রু

The Daily Star

Wellspring of Pride

by Mahfuz Anam

IN the life of every nation there are events that over the years, acquire a significance far greater than it originally seemed to have. Ekushey February (21st February 1952) is such an event in the life of our nation. What started off as a day to mark the sacrifices of a few courageous souls to give our language the status of a state language, became in time the rallying point of all our subsequent democratic movements.

Today Ekushey epitomises the most profound aspects of our national consciousness. It is at the very core of our identity as a people. It is the wellspring from which emerged our vision for an independent Bangladesh. It is from those fateful days 39 years ago that our long, arduous, painful and valiant journey towards liberation began.

What has Ekushey meant for us over the last four decades? For me, personally it means the beginning of my national consciousness. One of the most powerful memories of my childhood is that of my first visit to the Shaheed Minar. I did not understand what it was all about, but somehow I knew that I was participating in something important.

As I held my elder brother's hand and walked in the 'Prabhat Ferri' I sensed becoming a part of a far larger entity whose identity I did not know, with whose cause I was not familiar, yet to whose purpose, in a subconscious way, I found an echo in my inner being. The black badge, which hung rather oddly from my shirt, I wore with pride. It gave me an instant sense of equality with all the rest. I also knew that black was meant to signify our mourning, mourning for the students who laid down their lives so that we could speak in our mother tongue. But what I did not realise that day was that black was also a sign of defiance, defiance against all who conspired to dominate us culturally.

As I walked barefoot and my feet hurt due to the small pebbles and occasional sharp pieces of bricks that pricked my feet I had my first lessons in sacrificing for a cause. Quite unconsciously I was able to relate the pain to the sanctity of the event I was participating in. That perhaps led me to realise many years later that no national cause can be served without personal sacrifice. As I was laying wreath on the Shaheed Minar, I felt a vague proximity to the martyrs of the language movement and felt myself becoming a partisan to the cause.

I have remained so ever since. As I grew up, I understood that I was a partisan to the

cause of establishing my mother tongue as a national language. But far later, and after many more Ekusheys and 'Prabhat Ferris' I understood that I was a partisan to the cause of protecting my cultural heritage, of establishing my cultural identity and to the cause of realising the rights and guarantees to exist as an independent people. This is what Ekushey meant to me personally and to thousands and thousands of my generation and perhaps to the nation.

It was Ekushey that drew out the nationalist in us. Without knowing, we all became freedom fighters for the cause of our national salvation. It is to Ekushey that we owe this transformation.

Coming back to the question of what has Ekushey meant for us over the last 39 eventful, traumatic and maturing years, first and foremost it gave birth to that critical consciousness that helped us to emerge as a nation. Ekushey was the shock therapy that raised the initial doubts in our minds about our future in the newly formed Pakistan. It brought us face to face with the question as to what will happen if we cannot speak in our mother tongue? How would we communicate with each other or teach our children if not in our mother tongue? What would happen to us as a people? The last question triggered a desperate set of other realisations that made the significance of Ekushey far larger than it originally was. Thus we see the language movement transforming itself into a far bigger movement for the cultural identity of the Bengali people. Thus we see that along with the question of state language, other far reaching questions, including that of promoting and protecting our economic and political rights came to the forefront of our public consciousness. As a result even after the acceptance by the Pakistani government of Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan, the movement did not subside because by then it had acquired greater dimensions, as later events proved to us all. Thus experience of Ekushey lies at the very core of our emergence as a nation.

Second, Ekushey gave us a sense of direction. Having taken an active part in the birth of Pakistan we were rudely shocked into realising that within the framework of Pakistan our cultural identity was doomed. At that crucial moment of disillusionment the language movement and subsequently the annual observance of Ekushey gave us a sense of direction. At that moment we perhaps did not know that we will have to go our own independent way.

However what we did know was that we will have to fight for our cultural and linguistic rights every inch of the way and that we will have to be ever vigilant in this new state of Pakistan to protect ourselves. Thus the annual observance of Ekushey became far more important than the mere showing respect to our martyrs. It became an exercise in self-realization. An annual event through which we would clarify our thoughts, sharpen our vision and replenish our energies to carry on our struggle forward.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Ekushey gave us a sense of pride. As we well know that an effective method of keeping a nation down is to take away from its people a sense of pride about themselves. Practised throughout the period of the British colonial rule, the Pakistanis quickly followed through and tried to propagate negative racial and cultural stereotypes about the Bengali people. In the face of it came our language movement and the sacrifice of our students for their mother tongue. Suddenly the racial and cultural slurs were exposed to be what they were worth — mere slurs — produced and propagated to continue their domination over us. Pride in the courage and sacrifice of our students gave us self-confidence, which together with our sense of

outrage that we felt for their attempt to suppress our mother tongue, provided the motive force for our continued struggle till we became independent.

There is, however, something special about the Ekushey February of 1991. It is at the same time a celebration and a commitment. On the one hand it is a celebration of the successful struggle of the people against autocracy, against an illegitimate government and against the seizing of power by non-democratic forces. On the other hand it is a commitment to guard our democracy with vigilance, to restore the rule of law and to provide basic needs for our people. It is a commitment to hold free and fair elections so that only the true representatives of the people can be entrusted with the task of running our government.

As we celebrate Ekushey this year, let us remember all those who, through their struggle and sacrifice, has made all that we enjoy today possible — the most important of which is the pride of being a citizen of an independent and sovereign country.

As a respect to their sacrifice, can we resolve not to repeat the mistakes of the past, so that we do not lose democracy once again, and we are never again be ruled by those whom we do not elect to govern us.

Ekushey : Its Culture and Politics

Waheedul Haque

One

'Ekushey' is more formally called the 'Shaheed Dibosh'. Very aptly so. Nevertheless, it could as well be called the 'Language Day', or the 'Culture Day' without detracting in any way from its connotation and significance. If all three names could be some magic be rolled into one, even that would fit Ekushey quite snugly. But something a very big thing would still be left out. The politics that led to Ekushey and the politics it gave birth to are not reflected in any of these names. Ekushey, like the Roman god Janus or Koestler's concept of 'holon', with one of its two faces looks towards its progenitor, the millennia-old Bangla culture — and with the other looks indulgently towards its progeny — the same Bangla culture. And this holds true for Ekushey's situation in the politics of four decades of the Bangalee people and of untold decades heretofore.

Although the cultural aspects of Ekushey is stressed more, it is sad to note that achievement in this arena has been worse than niggardly in the thirtyeight years that has already passed after that great event.

And at the same time it is in wonderment that we catalogue the political fall-out of that event in 1952 which had so deceptive a cultural facade. It is with a heavy heart I have observed through all these years the passing into oblivion of the supremely important political milestone — the 1954

rejection of Muslim League by the Bangalee masses. That opened the portals of the fall of Pakistan. After that the fate of that monstrosity was sealed and December 16, '71 was only less than 200 months away. In its sweep and its power the '54 revolution was comparable only to the Liberation War — and in certain ways it was the more pervasive and involving of the two. To forget '54 is to fail to appreciate the first political fruits of the Language Movement. The question of carving the right niche for Bangla as Pakistan's national language was very much wound up with the one of cultural self-determination. From there to political self-determination was only a small step. Fiftyfour compelled the state that was to consider the idea of party — a kind of concession by the majority partner, the Bangalees, and even then until then an unthinkable herby. Without '54 a constitution wouldn't come in '56.

What sustained the Bangalees politically in the years of Ayubi dictatorship but Ekushey and its cultural follow-ups. Tagore Centenary in '61 was the best of such follow-ups and how effectively it challenged the autocracy and loosened the military stranglehold on the Bangalees. From that the '62 Movement and the challenge of '64 flowed but naturally. From then on to June '67 and the mass upsurge of '79 — the last two inevitable steps to Liberation War which was now a matter of course.

Ekushey for the Bangalee is synonymous with self-determination. What had it to offer once the Bangalees got their first independent state in so many centuries? There was no visible snag to cultural self-determination. But we are now talking of the politics of Ekushey. Soon after independence the politics in Bangladesh was blacked out by a visitation from the barracks of a ghost of the Ayubi kind — same blueprint. Some building up charisma. A long long nightmare of lost rights and thorough corruption, of every civilised institution crumbling and social moves and values degenerating into unhealthy stinking pits of social bog — was at long last halted and a brilliant day ushered by the same forces that built the Ekushey — the students.

If the student builders of the December 6 victory over the military and autocratic sway on state power were not very pronounced by moved by the ideals of Ekushey in their action — their unchaining of Lady Liberty was the first big step in the restoration and eventual blossoming of democracy. Ekushey happens to be synonymous with democracy too. There are two corollaries to democracy — nationalism and secularism. And what else but Ekushey has been initiating the Bangalee intelligentsia unrelentingly into these concepts and ideals?

The way the events are shaping in the post-Victory-2 months, Ekushey is going to be politically relevant — indeed a very much determining factor — once again in the political becoming of our people.

Two

Although on the face of it Ekushey was a cry for one's right of language — something to do primarily with culture — we have not walked very far culturally since that day in 1952. While our population has just about doubled over the intervening years, our literacy figures are marking time at old spots and our academia are churning out anything but supremely useful brilliant scholars and intellectuals in any respectable members. The cause of broadening the base of education and as such adding evernew dimensions to our language goes pathetically abegging.

As for the arts — music and drama, painting and literature — things are not that bad. But it is decidedly a long way from the situation Ekushey should reasonably have blossomed them into.

Why so? Has Ekushey been indeed so sterile culturally — and the post-Ekushey cultural situation so dismal and cultural prospects so bleak? Ekushey central cultural significance lies in:

1. Its power to open the floodgates of a national awakening by basing all effort in education and the arts, science

and technology, politics and administration on the exclusive use of Bengali language.

2. In enshrining the indivisibility of the Bengali language and culture and ensuring the away of such in the rather volatile socio-political situation in East Pakistan turned Bangladesh.

3. In making it inevitable that the polity of the Bengali has as its base language and culture, history and geography rather than religion which is waiting in all four events — and to ensure that the polity continues to be so.

4. In ensuring that Bengali language and culture effectively work to the building of a just and egalitarian society rich in culture — through cutting down on social and economic class and caste communal and regional barriers.

5. In responding to primarily the Bengali people's and then also of all others peopling this state, rights to education and culture and social equity.

How far has Ekushey succeeded in living up to its central points? Not eminently, perhaps. And that is the more reason why Ekushey has much more to achieve if only to make up for its less than bright performance — culturally.

Three

There's a way to account for Ekushey's cultural failure. Granted, society has not made a great stride in literacy and education and literature and other areas of culture — including the quality of the social fabric and character of the individual. And after accepting that it is difficult to see how Ekushey has, if at all, made any difference in the life and society of the Bengali people other than politically. But that is not all there is to the question.

From '52 to '71 all political movement was brought about by cultural initiative and groundwork, not through the enterprise of this or that political leadership. The rise of Bengali nationalism — the political expression of the Bengali people's quest for its roots, for an identity occasioned by February 21, 1952 — directly fashioned all politics from '54 to '71. The Ekushey, the wellspring of it all, was followed up by such great cultural events as (a. The Comilla cultural conference in '53; b. The Purba Pakistan Sahitya Sammelan which with wide participation of the major writers of both the Bengalis set forth in unequivocal terms the case for the Bengali people's separate cultural identity; c. The birth of Agrani Sangha and Purba Pakistan Gono Natya Sangsad and coming to Dhaka of Altaf Mahmud — all signifying a brilliant start of songs and music and shows of Resistance — from a viewpoint of Marxism enlightenment; d. The Karmart Cultural Conference at Santosh, convened by Moulana

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স্বদেশে নিঃসহায়, তবু তার মুক্তিযুদ্ধ হাত
উত্তোলিত, উদ্ভাসিত
কী এক সুবোধ প্রতিজ্ঞা
— সুকান্ত ভট্টাচার্য

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