ON THE DEATH OF A SOLDIER (EJON SAINIKOR MRITYUT)

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“People are sick, but they have not felt it. Sickness has turned into a habit.” – The gentlemen very often repeated these words. And for his words his relatives, his neighbours nicknamed him ‘Pagala’, mad Chowdhury. He had been identified as ‘mad’, ‘insane’ which made me curious to know him. Nobody enjoyed his company – they get irritated. People ignored him as a person who pokes nose in other’s affairs.

- His line of thinking is unique. Others follow the much trodden path – but he does not. Are these the sign of insanity? Barua expressed his irritation like this..

- Actually the entire system is so rotten that the person cannot tolerate. We also feel it, suffer – but let it go on as it is – but Chowdhury cannot. He concluded the discussion like this.

Hearing the varied comments about this person from various people I have been attracted to this man. And that this fascination has become so deep rooted --- has been made clear by the image of his death. I saw through the window of our house – he was laid down under the basil three at his courtyard in a north-west position. Sound of howling comes out of the house. His son is sitting in a benumbed position. Preparations are going on for his last rites.

“I’m not feeling good” – these words are not meaningful enough to state my mental condition, a vast area of the mind is lying vacant. I have been attending the demands of all the daily chores. Even after that ---something a sense of heavy loss – depress me – I suffer from a loss of hope, an epoch – the pain of end the, death of tradition sometimes press me down. I glance at the people around – they are going
on normally. Perhaps outwardly I also appear like that — if the condition of all the people is like mine — very good. No need to love hope. The trend that the person wanted to set will be started by someone else.

All people, including the neighbours were shocked at the news of Uttam Chowdhury’s death. Because Chowdhury turned into an immortal perennial bore. The majority of them wanted respite from his company. Gradually he lost his own identity and came to be known as Pagala Chowdhury. Perhaps my love of the unusual attracted me towards the men. I cannot name this fascination but Anita sometimes teased me —

- Is it not that you have fallen in love with Chowdhury?
- Love at this age?
- Age does not ascertain love. Love itself defines the age.

There ends the reference to Chowdhury. But my inner mind experiences turbulence by the activities of the man Uttam Chowdhury. The plaited dirty dhoti put on by him, the hairy chest peeping through a torn vest, dirty teeth — all these repelled me against that person. When he talks to my husband I try not to look at his features. I try my best to avoid his eyes.

- Hey, please bring us two cups of tea. My husband calls from the terrace. The man visited us frequently.
- How are you? — he always asks me when I offer him the cup of tea. I place the cup of tea on the table. I respond looking away from him and come back.

When the man declared that he will build his house in the vacant plot adjoining ours I felt worried. I had the uneasy feeling that if an executive engineer erects his building on the plot lying at our southern direction then our home will be
damp. But nothing of the sort happened. The man could complete the Assam type 
house only in a long period of three years. On the day of Grihaprabesh taking tea at 
their place I noticed that there was no ceiling, no fan, no light and the rooms were 
not even whitewashed.

- He is very honest. No greed for money. So he is in such a state – my 
husband was full of compassion for him. Corrupt officers of his equal rank are living 
in luxury and affluence. Actually by sticking to his ideals what is he aiming at?

Twenty five years have elapsed since he started being our neighbour. 
Sometimes I throw a reluctant gaze towards the man working at his yard, planting 
cabbage, watering the vegetables – the same dirty Dhoti on his waist plaited in two, 
hairy torso inside the rag like vest, eyes full of eye crust and amazing things was this 
that I gradually came to tolerate the shabby look of the person without averting my 
eyes.

- I could look at his eyes directly, started to look at his teeth and eyes without 
a tendency to vomit.

- Haven’t you fallen in love with Chowdhury? I asked myself the question 
that Anita asked me.

- No, no, the traditional concept of love cannot include this fascination. Then what kind of love is this? How to define, how to explain?

I put this question to me many times?

As I cleared Amu’s eyes and face and dragged him towards me – has something like that happened?
I brushed Amu’s teeth, helped him gargle — have I done something like that. Then how the dirty teeth and the eyes of Uttam Chowdhury no longer evoke in me a tendency to vomit.

Is it that I have entered into some discharge from the eyes — and they have become a part of my life. I cannot explain this state, Don’t know what happens, why it happens to me?

The religious rites of Uttam Chowdhury are being performed, men are busy running on different errands, the Sanskrit Professor has been reciting and explaining the Slokas from Geeta and me? I am not feeling alright. I first thought that I could not accept the death of Chowdhury. But now I realize — it is not that — not the death — but the fact that everyone has taken for granted the death of Uttam Chowdhury so normally — that I am unable to digest.

All people do not possess a fire within them; but there was a fire burning inside the heart of Chowdhury. The funeral pyre can burn that man’s physical body but what can burn out that fire within? That fire is not yet extinguished. Working in the kitchen at night, I look at the glow of fire running around in Chowdhury’s vegetable garden.

- This is gaseous fire. We saw them at the paddy fields of the village in our Childhood. Our grandma calls them UKA — my husband tried to dispel my confused feelings.

The news of Uttam Chowdhury’s death shocked the neighbours and they regretted —

Should a person die in his sleep like this?
How sad; such an honest and sincere man is not to be seen these days. All talented people think differently from common people.

- All brilliant people are generally eccentric.

The dead Chowdhury, Uttam Chowdhury lying North West under the basil tree – dragged out these words of admiration and praise from the crowd. Had they anticipated his premature death they perhaps would not have neglected him. When alive – men are considered to be immortal. But death comes so suddenly that we have only a feeling of regret that nothing has been done for the person.

Everything was in order. However his corporal life was – the demised has the good fortune of having all praise and admiration. The neighbours have taken part in his cast rites considering his humble add honest self. His place is littered with people. Welcoming the people, arranging various items like Sugar, Suji, fruits, properly, his tow daughters’ are not having a moment’s respite do think of their departed father.

Mrs. Chowdhury has been dazed by the praise and admiration showered on her dead spouse to such an extent that she was at a loss to realize whether he has been really dead or not.

- Come for the rite of Matsyasparsha day after tomorrow. Mrs. Chowdhury humbly requested everybody at the time of parting. People were so busy in the formalities that there was no scope for expressing grief and sorrow. This preoccupation of the people troubled me.

Death has softened the rudeness of the people. Men were relived that now they were sorry for the negligence and disregard shown to the person – I tried to grasp it looking at the dead profile of Chowdhury. Death has completely changed
the mental attitude the people has till yesterday. Death is a rude end without rhyme or reason. Still people have accepted – accepted it normally. Hearing the news of his death people expressed their concern, death has changed their views, but now they have started to go back to their own place.

- "Come for Matsyasparsha" Mrs. Chowdhury has reminded every one. The lady has composed herself during the last ten days, I tried to understand her hardship and her problems. It is comfortable for the people like me to live at a distance and observe the person and shower him with eulogies from this side of the boundary wall. But it was never a pleasure for his wife to kiss the foul mouthed man because of the remains of food staff in his teeth. I even understand how harassing it can be to maintain a family relation with a person who leads the life of a half saint. The degree of my fascination and praise did not lessen even when I felt sorry for Mrs. Chowdhury. However deeper I entered into the person – the irritating sensation of eye crust and leftovers in his teeth started going down. I enter the hairy body of the person through his torn vests – how well formed his body is.

Why have you kept these snaps like this?

- Entering Neera’s study I was amazed. The imprint of her lipstick on them. at this age. Is she mad! Her husband is away – she can be bothered by lust. You have fallen in love with the most wanted person, be careful, you may be caught by the spies. Neera has arranged on her table the cassette of his lectures and books written on his life full of romances.

- So soft spoken the man is. So composed. How piercing his gaze is.

- But do you realize his activities – his philosophy of life.

- You have gone mad.
- It's fun to be mad like this and this madness has saved me from the pain of separation from Subimal. Think I have got rid of some allergen. You can accept these relationships or not. Gathering used tea cups or taking note of the grocery is no longer a problem.

- This man is polygamous – you know.

- That's quite normal, I don't care.

That day I formed her words – strange. But I have been slightly shaken by a new sensation from the day of Chowdhury’s death. Sometimes it becomes strong all of as sudden. Then it is ................. Sometimes I look at myself – what happens to me? Why his death erodes me like this? The man working at this vegetable garden in a torn vest, shabby Dhoti and rotten slippers. I was looking at for so many years through my kitchen window. I listen to his words while talking to my husband at our porch/terrace. I passed over the time when I had a desire to vomit looking at his eyes full of eye crust and teeth coated with food grins. But later my attitude towards the man totally changed. I began to tolerate the person whom everyone labelled as 'insane', could endure his nasty looks without a feeling to vomit. I started enjoying the sight of this man as I relished listening to music, viewing a good movie or reading a book. Through my kitchen window I look at the man working at his vegetable garden – my eyes no longer register his teeth, eyes, dirty dress, dilapidated slippers – like the gaze of Arjun fixed at the bird's eyeball my gaze also became transfixed at the man's hairy chest – going further I even entered his inner body – stuffed with lustrous jewels. I had gone mad like king Midas. I must have them. I laughed at Neera – strange thoughts, mental luxury – I told her. But what happens to me? I am not yet able to accept his death. I have gone mad searching for him.
through my kitchen window. Thirteen days have gone by since his death. His wife can easily ask people to come for *Matsyasparsha*. But I can't. I am not able to accept it normally, but I have been eroded by other people's mentality of taking it for granted. A man is born to die- death is inevitable — I know this is inevitable. But I am not able to take the death of this man easily. Why? He is nobody — only a neighbour of mine. Yet there is a void — a large void. I am feeling that my country — people of my country will get lost in this hollow. At the dead of night I try to feel myself — erosion inside and outside my body and a depth. What to do. Where to stand upon?

- Anita's words ring in my ear now and then - 'Haven't you fallen in love with Uttam Chowdhury?' If the hollow/void created by his absence is love — then I've fallen in love, love has hundred parameters — includes so many things — manifest in so many forms. Friend, love, child — all shackled in the wheel of love.

Actually everyone should have fallen in love with Uttam Chowdhury... All should have tried to understand the man. At a later date the man turned mad, restless. He had very sharp gaze—-but it became stable, 'mad', insane, half mad' his own name got lost in this crowd of nicknames. We have not gone mad because we are not able to think as Uttam Chowdhury thought. We cannot talk like that — shutting our eyes we try to avoid the problem. Uttam Chowdhury did not shut his eyes — he observes — so his eyes are so restless — so sharp. We do not see, we shut our eyes, so there is no chance of being mad. The man remain always alert — suffers, protests — a group of people incur the loss. The loser dissatisfies — others escape — others tease him as insane. The steps that we should have taken immediately, the work we should have done with our united effort, the problems we should have
considered together—are not done—not considered—so the reaction of Uttam Chowdhury has been termed as madness. May be that one or two like me has noticed the fire burning in Uttam Chowdhury’s chest—has suffered—but are unable to accept. People have failed to understand that the death of a person like Uttam Chowdhury should not be taken for granted. If they do not want to realize understand this—what else will they realize? The man wanted to make us understand. He wanted to make us realize how important it was to understand, to keep your eyes open! He was being laughed at—teased—and gathering them in his heart he breathed his last. This is no usual death—death of an epoch—an era. Noting else is to be done after this—end of all of doing and accepting how normally men have accepted this horrible end and have kept them busy in preparation for formalities.

Come for Matsyasparsha—how normal has become the man’s absence. People are busy making this death normal & ordinary by relishing their sumptuous meal.

Hey, what are you doing? Anita come to me.

Nothing

But what are your reflecting upon?

Certain words—like this—noting—have a camouflaging connotation. This word can negate some transparency. Few words are there as powerful as—nothing—to hide any state, any situation. Now this word has become endearing to me. If I tell her what I am thinking about—Anita will laugh at me. You are actually not able to accept this death easily are you? His own family has started leading a normal life and you have been ruminating over it? Does it have any sense? Is it sensible?
I have no answer to her queries.

- Have you gone through the newspaper today? More than two hundred people are dead. Twenty seven people were bunt alive – massacre by the people armed with weapons. Gujarat is burning. Quite recently seventeen people were killed even here at Paharpur. Hundreds of people are dying everyday.

- Yes, I know. I have read all these news. Massacre at Neli, public grave at Hatisila, death at Paharpur, at Gujarat – not only me but everyone feels sorry about them. But the normalization of such news wears me out.

Why are you shattered at the death of the person? Her eyes express compassion.

- Uttam Chowdhury is not a person – an institution an organization – an epoch. His death is the death of an era. After Uttam Chowdhury there is no one to raise fingers at the Minister and bureaucrats and officers.

This death – has wiped out and cleaned an era. After him there is none to disobey and talk to political leaders’ with his raised fingers at the circuit house.

...Election was quite near.

Few days left for election.

That day Uttam Chowdhury sat face to face with the minister at the circuit house.

- Chowdhury, I want Fifty thousand rupees for our party.

- But how can I give Fifty thousand rupees? I can give you a maximum amount of fifty rupees.

- I am not talking of giving from your our wallet, manage the contractors.
- I never accept even a rupee from anyone. Why should I take bribe for your party? What do you think of me?

- The minister was furious – do you know who are you talking to?

- Why not? I’m talking to a corrupt leader of a corrupt party. Uttam Chowdhury has been shaking all over. And on that very night Uttam Chowdhury had been transferred to another place replacing him by another officer, where there was little scope for monetary transaction. The new officer was quite an efficient person. He raised quite a large sum which was beyond the minister’s expectation.

I become restless wherever I think of this person. Some values will be wiped out negated by his death. I have been suffering very much.

- Dignitaries of our country who declared that the corrupt people would be hanged in the nearest light post – did not do anything or couldn’t do anything even when they sow the seeds of corruption in their lifetime. But Uttam Chowdhury fought a great deal with his limited resource – let this country remain habitable for everyone, let the sky, air, water, earth remain clean in order to inhale fresh air. The man tried his level best. Fought against the powerful explosives with the simple dao in his hand. He fought till the end – never made a compromise.

- Sir, here is the bill. The smart accounts officer offered the Bill toward Uttam Chowdhury.

- Yes, oh! – why are you offering this Bill. You know that this is a false one – not only those who sell their body for money are whores – those who sell their conscience are also whores. You are a whore selling your own self for money. The officer stumbled out of the room with an effort.
Uttam Chowdhury became a horror for these people. He made the labourers construction roadways dig the sides of the street to ascertain whether the proper amount of pitch is used or not. Otherwise he will never pass the Bill.

An era ended at Uttam Chowdhury’s death. This death wiped out all traces of idealism and old values.

I noticed a fire moving restlessly in the kitchen garden of Uttam Chowdhury. I know that the fire in his chest is not yet extinguished. The corporal body has started melting in the dust. But going inside his chest covered by the torn vest I saw that his spiritual body is burning like a fire. Had that fire been kept burning, people suffering form winter cold could have got some respite and comfort. So, it is not proper to forget his death over a feast and make that demise appear very ordinary, very normal.

- I do understand, Anita, Death is inevitable. Dying is not a great thing.

It is not a good symptom for mankind to make death, that means death of a person like Uttam Chowdhury so natural and normal affair.

United effort of people should have made this death, exceptional, abnormal, genuine so that death pauses a while. Let the death of this person shake the earth below our feet – countrymen shiver, on it.

Ordinary dress, hair neatly combed and pasted with oil – grey coloured old trousers and a white shirt.

It may be that the shirt was originally a checked one – but later on no trace of it. When I had a close view of the man – I saw the remnants of food stuck in his teeth and eyes full of eye crust.

A vomiting tendency filled my mouth. I didn’t like it.
But nearness made all equations topsy – turvy. From the time I began to understand the man, cleaning his eyes with a clean wet muslin and entering into his hairy chest through the holes in his vest – I found that – the cells in his brain have been soaked in blood. The flame within had made him fearless and terribly, indifferent to the pleasures and comfort in life. How did that lean figure become so powerful to nurture that burning fire within him. So he came forward to fight with his Dao against the enemy equipped with canons. It had been painful for me to find that head strong (Matha pagal) fighter lying under the Basil tree – perhaps it was painful for other too – but it should have been painful for everyone.

- Had there been some more men like Uttam Chowdhury the nature of the land and people of our country would have been different. I had been moved by the comment made by Biren Bharali. My loneliness lessened to some extent.

To-day is the Matsyasparsha rites of Uttam Chowdhury – late Uttam Chowdhury. What a queer system of expressing sorrow. This man was not an individual – he was an institution – an organization. An organisation – a living individual revolution he was. He revolted with his thoughts and deeds. Not with words. A humble burning fire was within him. Had people supported him he could have made the world clean by burning the garbage of the earth, sky and air. The man who wanted all people to breathe happily died himself. A tradition has come to an end. People ignored him as outdated. People are sick. Some unknown diseases are ailing them.

Arrangements for Matsyasparsha is going on enthusiastically on the other side of the fence. The professor of Sanskrit has been reciting the Geeta with scores of people following the words:

Vasansi Jirnani Yatha Bihaya

Nabani Grihnoti Naroha Parani
The audience perhaps decides to put them into practice. Srimati Chowdhury has started considering Chowdhury’s body to be old clothing. The human soul does not have its own identity, it has been after the process of accepting a new body after rejecting Chowdhury’s old body. Srimati Chowdhury is trying to compromise with the notion that Chowdhury’s death is not ultimate. Is the flame moving in the kitchen garden the spirit that came out of Chowdhury’s body? – busy entering a new identity.

- The soul is immortal, indestructible. The soul is imperishable, omnipresent, steady and perennial. (So, hey Arjun, knowing the true nature of the soul you should not grieve. In this world all creatures remain unseen before birth and after death, only at the middle state the living beings remain prominent. So, in this state of affairs why should anyone be sorry?) The deliberation of the Professor has lessened the grief of the people.

But the moving flames in the kitchen?

- That is a kind of gas. We saw it in our backyard in our childhood. My mother called these flames “Uka”. – my husband replied to the question that I uttered absent minded.

Perhaps the man’s indifference to the worldly pleasures are glittering with the soul.

It is an error to accept this singular, exceptional person as a normal human being. People are sick. Unknown diseases are ailing them – Uttam Chowdhury thought so. Chowdhury is no more alive to think of respite from this disease. Let the flame burn in the kitchen garden – let the man be there. Entering a new body he will again have the advantage of thinking about people.