CHAPTER-V

LANGUAGE MOVEMENT IN HAILAKANDI

Linguistic minorities remains almost in every state of India and Assam is no exception to this. In 1959 Assam Sahitya Sabha came out with the demand of declaring Assamese as the official language of Assam. To pass the demand in the Assembly and to legitimate it they started creating pressure by organizing movements in the Brahmaputra Valley. 9th September, 1959 was observed as the State Language Day. Procession taken out, meetings were held, resolutions were adopted. In the Assembly members from different political parties raised the issue during the budget session in 1960. However, the government preferred to wait till they get the demand for declaring Assamese as the official language of Assam from the linguistic minorities of the state. This statement of the Chief Minister set the Brahmaputra Valley afire. On the other hand, mainly the Bengali speaking people were encouraged. However, the demand ultimately took violent shape in certain areas of Assam in the month of May 1960. The government of Assam then examined the matter and prepared a Bill following the A.P.C.C. resolution. Mr. Chaliha said that the Bill would be “more or less on the A.P.C.C. resolution making Assamese applicable to Cacher and Hill district as the official language as and when they prepare for it.” However, the proposed Bill raised a storm of protest in some corners of the state dominated by linguistic minorities including hill areas. Inside the A.P.C.C. the representatives from Barak Valley voiced for declaring Bengali as another language of Assam. The Assamese Bengali controversy made the entire Assam a hot bed of politics. The government of Assam started to think of bringing a
bilingual bill which was vehemently protested by the Assamese middle class. They demanded that the issue of official language should not be mixed up or confused with the rights and facilities in respect of linguistic minorities. Under such circumstances large scale violence erupted in certain corners of Brahmaputra Valley in the month of May, 1960 when the non-Assamese people of Shillong staged a demonstration at which provocative slogans against the Assamese language and also against the A.P.C.C. resolution were shouted. This was followed by widespread disturbances in the state, so many houses were burnt down, linguistic minorities were forced to leave their areas and so on.

The government appointed a commission under justice Gopal Mehrotra on 9th November, 1960 to inquire into the cases of rioting. The Commissioned opined, "the disturbances were not the direct result of the firing at guwahati. Deep rooted and long standing mutual dislike for both the communities created the atmosphere in which the language controversy gained momentum resulting in the holocaust."

However, in a tensed situation the Assam Official Language Bill (1960) was passed in the Assam Assembly. The passing of Assam Official Language Bill on 24th October, 1960 resulted in the development of protest in various forms in every linguistic minority dominated areas. The Hills tribals also resented at this enactment. It was voiced from the Bengali leadership that Bengali should get equal status with Assamese. To them it was the imposition of Assamese language over the non-Assamese people and tried to defend their argument by showing the provision of the State Reorganization Commission. There was debate in the Assembly on this issue. Members in the Assembly spoke in favour and against the bill. Finally the Bill was passed by 50/0 votes.

The enactment of Language Bill was followed by a large scale protest movement in Barak Valley. The Sangram Parisad was formed by taking representatives from three Sub-Divisions of the Valley. Resolutions were adopted to fight against the Bill and to declare Bengali as one of the official languages of Assam. Anti-congress attitude got a flaming turn in Barak Valley. There developed a
common idea among the people of Barak Valley that the Congress Leaders of the Valley had failed to tackle the political situation. Agitation started everywhere in the Valley and Hailakandi was also not out of that one. But the scenario of Hailakandi was not like the other places of the Valley as there was movement in favour and against the Language Bill.

While describing the language movement of Barak valley the movement of Hailakandi, though it was an integral part of Barak Valley, needs special attention to describe its character and scale which separated the movement from the language movements of the other sub-divisions of the Valley namely Silchar and Karimganj. Like other places of Cacher district the language movement, against the Language Bill of 1960 which declared Assamese as official language of Assam, was also started in Hailakandi. Here the scale of agitation was more massive in comparison to Silchar but the police firing and the killing of some protesters brought the attention of the movement towards Silchar and the movement after 19th May in the Valley was Silchar centric and to some extent guided by the leadership of Silchar proper.6

Here in Hailakandi when the movement was in its peak, there was an inner current of anti-Bengali language had been growing up. The Muslims of the Sub-division were in hesitation to participate in the movement. They became very much in confusion and in apprehension in regard to their future existence. However, because of the participation of some Muslim leaders and the overall situation of the region did not permit them to come out openly against the Bengali Language Movement. The Muslims of Hailakandi and to some extent of the Barak Valley were in confusion whether the movement only aimed to get equal status of Bengali with Assamese or there was any hidden motive of the creation of a separate state.

On 5th February 1961, under the leadership of Sri Abdul Rahman Choudhury of Hailakandi a huge public meeting had taken place at Karimganj. In that meeting 400 delegates from different corners of the Barak Valley attended the meeting. It was then resolved in the conference that if Bengali language was not recognized as one of the official languages of Assam, non-co-operation movement would be started in the
whole Barak Valley. In that meeting it was decided to form "Sangram Parisad" by including delegates from Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi.⁷

On 8th Feb 1961, in the meeting of the "Sangram Parisad" at Hailakandi a central executive committee was formed with a view to starting mass agitation against the Bill. In three Gana Songram Parisad committees of Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi Sub-division three Secretaries were selected. Keshab Ch. Chakraborty was selected as the President and Haridas Deb was the Secretary of Hailakandi Sub-Division "Songram Parisad" Committee.⁸

Resolution was adopted that the 1st day of Bengali New Year i.e. 14th April 1961 would be observed as "Sapath Divas" (Oath Day).⁹ The aim of the Sangram Parisa was to spread the message of the movement to each and every door of the Valley by observing the 'Oath Day'.

Like the movement of Karimganj & Silchar the members of Sangram Parisad of Hailakandi started long march from Hailakandi on 10th May 1961. The march was started from Hailakandi Town Hall into three groups. Each group consisting of hundreds of agitators and travelled almost all the places of the Sub-divisions. The March was led by Abdur Rahman Barbhuinya, Keshab Chakraborty, Haridas Deb, Rathindra Kumar Sen, Nripen Choudhury and some others.¹⁰

The language activists while travelling from place to place organized meetings and discussion with the local people in which they explained the situation of Assam that forced to pass the Language Bill.¹¹ Some speakers described the occurrence of language riot in Brahmaputra Valley where Bengali speaking people were attacked and killed and that created an intense atmosphere of fear in the minds of the people. They also explained the future plight of the Bengali speaking people and invited them to join in the movement. The lecturers delivered by the speakers of the "Sangram Parisad" made the situation volatile. The Bengali speaking people of
the sub-division especially of the villages, who did not have any idea about the linguistic problem of the state, began to speak against the Assamese language. In this way the entire Hailakandi was bubbling with anger and was about to burst.

On 13th May, 1961 after completing the march the protesters reached Hailakandi and as expected thousands of people greeted them as they returned by winning a war. President of the Cachar District Gana Songram Parisad Mr. Abdur Rahman Choudhury and the Chairman, Hailakandi Municipality Mr. Promod Ranjan Bhattacharjee welcomed them by garlanding all the leaders. Amir Ali from Hailakandi Bar Association, Nimai Chandra Debnath from Displaced Society, Nabendu Dutta from Communist Party of India, Sachidananda Bhowmik from Weavers Association, Tulsidas Roy from Merchant Association, Upendra Dutta from Rickshaw Puller Association, Shaktidhar Choudury from Cachar District Press Association and other leading personalities welcomed the pedestrians.

After the completion of the welcome ceremony a big procession marched through the whole town and there after reached Kalibari Ground. Here under the presidentship of Abdur Rahman Choudhury a public meeting had taken place. In this meeting Nripati Ranjan Choudhury & Nisith Ranjan Das of Karimganj, Mahmud Ali Barbhuiya and Abhijit Dutta of Hailakandi addressed the gathering and appealed them to come out for language movement. They also used provocative words and explained the various angles of the movement. From the pedestrian group Haridas Deb, Nripendra Choudhury, Rathindranath Sen and Biswajit Chakraborty also addressed the meeting. While speaking all of them became emotional and explained the experience of their march. They also assured the gathering that everywhere they had got immense support from the people. Mahmud Ali Barbhuiya in his speech said that in order to suppress the language movement the Assam Govt. created a situation of war by deploying forces everywhere in the Valley. But the same government and its police remain silent spectators during other serious cases of the province. During the riot at Goreswar the role of police and the Assam Government was not beyond doubt. But when they were organizing democratic movement against the declaration of Assamese language the government was taking every possible attempt to suppress the movement. He also said to the Bengali Muslims that Bengali language is not only the language of Hindus. It was the time to fight together for Bengali language as it is
the mother tongue of both communities of the Valley. He cited the example of East Pakistan where in 1952 the Bengali speaking Muslims fought for their language. The Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan opposed the imposition of Urdu over the Bengali speaking people and in this way some protesters attained martyrdom.

Abdur Rahman Choudhury in his speech said that it was the time to come forward all section of people irrespective of caste, creed and religion to fight for the mother tongue. He condemned Chief Minister Mr. Chalia by saying that he was a treacherous and betrayed the people of Barak Valley forgetting that he won the assembly election from Badarpur of the Valley and demanded his resignation on the ground that the Chief Minister had lost his confidence from his constituency and so he should resign from the post and this is the judgment of this people’s court (meeting). He added that they were ready to face any adverse consequences that would be taken by the govt.

The administration of Hailakandi became afraid of watching the preparation of the movement by the ‘Sangram Parisad’ of Hailakandi Sub-division. As the date of total strike throughout the Valley was decided on 19th May 1961, the administration thought it better to arrest all the leading personalities of Hailakandi Sangram Parisad before the commencement of the movement on 19th May. Accordingly in the evening of 18th May 1961 leaders like Haridas Deb, Shaktidhar Choudhury and some other were arrested. The S. D. O. (Civil) Mr. Khosla came to the police station and met with O. C. Mr. Ahmed and instructed him to put them to Circuit House and the next day send them to Silchar Jail. On hearing the arrest of some leaders Mr. Keshab Chakraborty kept him in disguise. The student leaders then went to the houses of some female students and instructed them how to lead the movement and the picketing. Bharati Chakraborty, Anima Choudhury, Nanda Deb Choudhury and some others led the female picketers. In order to make the strike successful Ahi Bhusan Choudhury, Rajmohan Chakraborty, Kishore Mohan Nath, Santosh Mazumder, Rati Sen, Upendra Dutta and some others guided the picketers after the arrest of Shaktidhar Choudhury and Haridas Deb.
On 19th May, the picketers, in the very early morning, started to gather at Hailakandi Town Hall and from there they reached to all the government offices of the town. A group of picketers rushed to Hailakandi Railway Station and made all possible effort to stop the train moving towards Badarpur from Lala Ghat but could not succeed due to lathi charge and arrest of the picketers. Police also lathi charged over the picketers in the court campus and also arrested many of them. All most all the picketers were released in the evening but some leaders were detained for eight to ten days. All the central and state government officers could not open on that day and in front of every office picketers voiced against the Assam Government and the language Bill.16

The wave of the protest movement was limited not only in Hailakandi town; it also reached in each and every places of the Sub-division.

There was strike in Lala Bazar, Katlicherra, Manipur TE, Ainakhal, Japirbond and in other places. In Lala a procession of about three thousand people came out with the demand of declaring Bengali as one of the state languages of Assam. Here too state police attacked the procession and lathi charged and more than hundreds were injured. In a protest meeting at Katlicherra, under the president-ship of Md Safi Ahmed, all the speakers condemned the police atrocities in different places of Hailakandi Sub-division as well as Barak Valley.17

When the news of police firing and the death of protesters in Silchar reached to Hailakandi, the situation suddenly deteriorated and from the next day regular agitation continued in the form of procession, strike, blackout, non-cocking etc. till 29th May 1961.

It was in that time, a new situation had arisen in the valley and Hailakandi was its centre. To counter the activities of Sangram Parisad, non-Bengalis in Barak Valley, which included the Muslims, the Manipuris and the indigenous Cacharis formed another organization known as Shanti Parisad.18 Thus not only in Hailakandi but in entire Barak Valley the language movement took a new turn.

The Santi Parisad was formed on 21st May 1961. The leading role played behind the formation of Santi Parisad were Gulam Ziani Choudhury and Pulokeshi...
The Parisad had started a systemic campaign against the Bengali language movement and in favour of the Official Language Act of 1960. In order to make a base on the non-Bengali population including the Muslims, the Parisad started publishing pamphlets in which they criticized the activities of Sangram Parisad. In one of such pamphlet it was said that from few days a group of people started a movement against the Language Bill. By doing so they paralyzed the functioning of district, state and even central government agencies in the Valley and thereby caused sufferings of the innocent local people. Santi Parisad appealed to the people to think about the unholy consequences of the movement. It was also said that the rural people, particularly the Muslim community, should think about the hidden agenda of creating a separate state of the language movement and should cut involvement if any with Sangram Parisad as it was an illegal organization. The innocent village people were threatened and forced by the activists of the Bengali language movement to join with their protest programme. Santi Parisad also propagated that the main issue behind the formation of it was to fight for the helpless people of the Valley and to make people aware about their future.

The aims and objectives of the Santi Parisad were as follows:

1. To help the people of Cacher District by co-operating with the functioning of central as well as state government.
2. To keep the people of the district outside the activities of the Sangram Parisad.
3. To make acceptance of the Language Bill in Barak Valley and to work for this.
4. To keep Cachar an integral part of Assam and to work accordingly.
5. To place the sorrows, sufferings and needs of the people of the Valley before the government and to do work for its fulfillment.
6. To co-operate with the administration in maintaining law and order in the district.
7. To take all legal steps against any communal activities.

8. To establish peace amongst the terrorized people of the district.  

A number of minor clashes occurred between the Sangram Parisad and Shanti Parisad in different parts of the region. Shanti Parisad in a memorandum to the Home Minister of India demanded that Assamese should be the only official language of Assam. Meetings, counter demonstrations were organized in different places of Barak Valley by Shanti Parisad.

In a counter protest Sangram Parisad published a pamphlet on 7th June, 1961 and through it appealed to the people to keep watch on the activities of the Santi Parisad and treat them as antisocial.

On the completion of one month of the incident of 19th May 1961, the Sangram Parisad organized rallies, condolences, meetings, etc. in Silchar and other places of the Valley.

In Hailakandi on 19th June, 1961 the language movement took a violent turn when a group of people tried to enter the town through a procession and chanted slogan in favour of Assamese language. The situation became so hostile that police opened fire that killed five persons and fourteen people were injured. Army was bought into control the situation. The disorder and fear of further trouble was so intense that Hailakandi continued to be treated as a disturbed area till at least 21 Sept 1961.

It is interesting to note that in the year 1989 when Assam Sahitya Sabha had its annual session in Hailakandi, in an official resolution it paid homage to the five youths killed on 19th June 1961. It also granted them the status of martyr. By doing so it not only created 'counter martyrs' to language martyrs of 19th May. The counter martyrs were official martyrs as it had the recognition of Assam Sahitya Sabha. In doing so the Assam Sahitya Sabha not only recognized the rights and aspirations of indigenous Muslims of Hailakandi but also played a divide and rule game on the population of Barak Valley.
After the incident of Hailakandi, Sangram Parisad could not make any attempt to organize any mass movement in Barak Valley. The rise of anti-Bengali movement in the land of Bengali dominated area was a big blow in the rise of Bengali language movement. The leaders of Sangram Parisad could not study the mind set of the Bengali Muslims, Manipuri and indigenous Cacharis. They thought that the call for a movement for Bengali language would be as effective as it had happened in East Pakistan (Bangladesh), where the Bengali Muslims did not hesitate to fight against the imposition of Urdu, though their religion was same.

But here in Barak Valley the situation was totally different. The partition of India and referendum was still alive in the minds of the people. A large number of people who did not like to be with India and voted in favour of Pakistan still remained in Indian.25 These people, though they were Bengali, did not come forward to support the Bengali language movement. The “Purbachal Plan” and “Purbachal reconsidered” both had created a sense of apprehension in the minds of the Muslims, Manipuris and indigenous Cacharis that the success of Bengali language movement could ultimately led to the separation of Barak Valley from Assam. In such case the new state would be ruled and governed by the Bengali Hindu refuges and in such situation their position would be very much deplorable. Thus, it was quiet natural to think by the Muslims of Barak Valley not to support the language movement and did not like to take any risk of losing importance that they were getting from the state leadership and government. For example, the role of Mainul Haque Choudhury, then Minister in Assam Govt. had the capability to take active part and mobilized the people did not participate in the movement, but played a role of obscurity

Immediately after the partition of the country huge influx of Bengali refugees in Barak Valley from East Pakistan changed the social structure of the Valley. If we see the growth of population in Hailakandi from 1941-1951 and 1951-1961 the picture will become more clear that why the Muslims of Hailakandi did not participate in the movement. The growth rate of population in 1931-1941 was 10.29 percent, in 1941-1951 it was 17.48 percent and in 1951-1961 the rate increased to 27.23 percent.26 Thus it was a matter of great apprehension in the minds of the Muslims of the Sub division that they would become an insignificant minority and
under such prevailing situation if the language movement would turn in to a movement of separate state they would become in a stage of uncertainty.

Such things had not been studied by the leaders of Barak Valley who were entangled with language movement and as a result a large section of people remained and became detached from the Bengali language movement in the heart land of Bengali populated area.

The situation turned into an open protest by the Muslims of Hailakandi against the Bengali Language Movement when the 'Shastri Formula' was rejected by the leadership of the Sangram Parisad and other leaders of the Valley. According to the Shastri Formula:

1. The Assam Official language Act may be amended to do away with the provision relating to Mahakuma Parishads.

2. Communication between state head quarter and Cachar and the Autonomous Hill Districts to continue in English until replaced by Hindi.

3. At state level English will continue to be used for the present. Later, English will continue to be used along with Assamese.

4. The linguistic Minorities in the state will be accorded the safe guard contained in the Government of India’s Memorandum dated Sept. 1956.

5. Clarification may issue that under the provision of Act348 (3) of the constitution all Acts Bills Ordinances, Regulations and Orders etc, will continue to be published in the Official Gazette in English, even where these are published in Assamese under the second provision to section 3 of the official Language Act.

6. Some arrangements to be considered for effective implementation of development schemes at the district level.

7. The agitation in Cachar should be withdrawn. The Assam Government may consider the release of all prisoners detained in connection with the
Movement, except those charged with crime involving violence and sabotage, as soon as they are satisfied that the movement will not be resumed.  

There was provisions in the Shastri formula to safeguard the linguistic minorities. Thus, when ‘Shastri Formula’ was discarded by the leaders of the Sangram Parisad and Congress leaders of valley the hidden agenda of establishing Bengali Hindu dominance over others became clear in the minds of Muslims, Manipuris and indigenous Cacharis. The dissatisfaction on Shastri Formula by the leaders sowed the seed of separatism in the minds of the people and did not participate in the language movement and to protect their interest they founded a new organization named Shanti Parisad. Under the banner of it the Muslims of Hailakandi came out in open protest that resulted in the death of five protesters on 19th June, 1961.
Information on the document is not available.