CHAPTER VI

MOTHER TONGUE, MARTYRDOM AND MOVEMENT

As it has been seen in the previous chapters that religion played a very important marker of identity and symbol of political mobilization in the nationalist movements of South Asia; however after independence and partition of the country in 1947 religion temporarily ceased to have predominance and language emerged as the new marker of nationality and pivot of nationalist mobilization. In all the three cases studied above Bengali language emerged as the symbol of political movement. In all the cases speaker of Bengali language resisted the imposition of another language on them and fought for the reinstatement of their language to themselves. This is strange because Bengali was one of the most advanced languages of India in terms of its modernization and recorded progress. Although most of the Indo-Aryan languages of India began their journey at the same time, Bengali moved slightly ahead due to the advent of the British in Bengal earlier than other provinces. The nineteenth century ‘renaissance’ and the early impact of European literary advancement on the Bengali language and culture had accelerated the modernization of Bengali language. From Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Michael Madhusudan Dutta, there were massive endeavour to modernize the Bengali language and literature of making the vernacular make remarkable strides. The emergence of Rabindra Nath Tagore and the award of Nobel Prize for literature to him firmly established the comparative dominance of Bengali language.

However, in the areas outside Bengal where there was substantial Bengali settlement, there was a feeling of persecution among the Bengali speakers. The three
regions under study fall in this category. Manbhum, was an erstwhile part of Bengal presidency which was now placed under Bihar and under the dominance Hindi Language after the creation of Bihar state. Although a tribal area, it had a significant presence of Bengali population who practiced their own language and culture. Even the tribal of the area were speakers of Bengali language as their own vernacular was neither the medium of instruction nor was the lingua franca. In other words the myriad tribal speeches had relegated into background under the growing dominance of the Bengali language. East Pakistan was the partitioned half of the Bengal province which was overwhelmingly Bengali speaking. But, under the Pakistani rule there was persecution of the Bengali language and attempts of imposition of Urdu Language on them. The Bengali speakers were not only the overwhelming majority in East Pakistan, they were proud speakers of their vernacular. Even though Urdu was considered the language of Indian Muslims, the Muslims of East Pakistan refused to replace their mother tongue with it and resisted the moves to impose it on them as the medium of instruction. The imposition of Urdu was considered an attempt to persecute their mother tongue and impose the hegemony of alien language on them. Similarly in Assam, Bengalis were the dominant minority and a majority in the Cachar District that consisted of three sub-divisions. Hence the attempt to introduce Assamese language by the Government as the medium of instruction as well as official language was seen by this minority as an attempt to persecute their language and the imposition of an alien tongue on them. It is interesting to note that in all the three cases where mother tongue was perceived to be persecuted and consequently a movement was launched to resist against this persecution. In all the movements the mother tongue did not remain simply a ‘Language’. It was deified and feminized in the sense that language was elevated as mother tongue and hence viewed as sacred. Its repression was not simply a persecution of a language but the persecution of the mother herself. This mother is the mother of a collectively called nationality. Similarly the death that occurred during the nationalist agitation was not simply death, but martyrdom. Although for the state it was simply a law and order problem, for the communities involved in it was a nationalist struggle. A language movement had thus appropriated the nationalist discourse where one nation was shown as the oppressor nation while the other was the oppressed. Language
movements had therefore become a part of the collective struggle for national identity and nation building. Let us now analysis the concept of mother tongue and martyrdom as was used in the above mentioned movements.

**Language as Mother Tongue.**

According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary mother tongue means one’s native language or language from which others spring. The term mother tongue or mother language is used for the language that a person learnt as a child at home (usually from their parents). According to this definition children who grow up in bilingual homes could have more than one mother tongue or native language. The population Census of Canada, Statistics Canada defined mother tongue as “the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the individual at the time of the census.” It implies therefore that it is quite possible that the first language learned was no longer a speaker’s dominant language. This included young immigrant children, whose families have moved to a new linguistic environment, as well as people who learned their mother tongue as a young child at home (rather than the language of the majority of the community), who may have lost, in part or in totality, the language they first acquired.

Mother tongue is a concept. The origin of the concept of "mother tongue" can be traced to the notion that the first speech of the child is actually learnt from his mother by the child and as such his/her linguistic skills of a child are honed by the mother and therefore the language spoken by the mother would be the primary language that the child would learn. But in case of a single male parent, the same could be true of father even though there is no concept of father’s tongue. This type of culture-specific notion was however seen totally as a misnomer by certain critics of the notion itself. The first language of a child is part of their personal, social and cultural identity. Another impact of the first language is that it brings about the reflection and learning of successful social patterns of acting and speaking. It is basically responsible for differentiating the linguistic competence of acting. The linguists as well as educational technologists feel mother tongue is a “blessing in disguise” for people. This is because it is not merely a time-table subject in his education but is forced upon him from all sides. As a consequence it is learned by
both the direct or conscious and the indirect or unconscious method. The direct method supplements and regulates the knowledge gained by hearing. The mother tongue is hence an instrument for the development of the intellectual, moral and physical aspects of education.8

Historically the term was used by Catholic monks to designate a particular language they used, in stead of Latin, when they were "speaking from the pulpit."9 That is, the "holy mother of the Church" introduced this term and colonies inherited it from the Christianity as a part of their colonial legacy, thanks to the effort made by foreign missionaries in the transitional period of switching over from 18th C. Mercantile Capitalism to 19th C. Industrial Capitalism in India.10 In many countries such as Kenya, India, and various East Asian countries, "mother language" or "native language" used to indicate the language of one's ethnic group, in both common and journalistic parlance rather than one's first language.11 In Singapore, "mother tongue" refers to the language of one's ethnic group regardless of actual proficiency, while the "first language" refers to the English language that was established on the island through British colonization, which is the lingua franca for most post-independence Singaporeans due to its use as the language of instruction in government schools and as a working language.12 J. R. R. Tolkien in his 1955 lecture "English and Welsh" distinguished the "native tongue" from the "cradle tongue," the latter being the language one happens to learn during early childhood, while one's true "native tongue" may be different, possibly determined by an inherited linguistic taste, and may later in life be discovered by a strong emotional affinity to a specific dialect.

The Brazilian linguist Cleo Altenhofen considered the denomination "mother tongue" in its general usage to be imprecise and subject to various interpretations that are biased linguistically, especially with respect to bilingual children from ethnic minority groups. He cites his own experience as a bilingual speaker of Portuguese and Riograndenser Hunsrückisch, a German-rooted language brought to southern Brazil by the first German immigrants. In his case, like that of many children whose home language differs from the language of the environment (the 'official' language), it is debatable which language is one's 'mother tongue'. Many scholars have given definitions of 'mother tongue' through the years based on common usage, the
emotional relation of the speaker towards the language, and even its dominance in relation to the environment. However, all of these criteria lack precision.

The mother tongue was therefore defined variously,

- Based on origin: the language(s) one learned first (the language(s) in which one has established the first long-lasting verbal contacts)
- Based on internal identification: the language(s) one identifies with/as a speaker of,
- Based on external identification: the language(s) one is identified with/as a speaker of, by others.
- Based on competence: the language(s) one knows best.
- Based on function: the language(s) one uses most.

Although the word mother tongue essentially means a language learnt from the mother it gradually developed into a concept wherein mother tongue began to imply language of the community, nationality or the nation. In other words in certain interesting cases of an inter nationality marriage, if the mother belongs to a language group who did not speak the language of the father's nationality, still the offspring's mother tongue would be the language of the land i.e of the father's nationality. Although it is called mother tongue it has therefore serious patriarchal implications. The concept of mother tongue is based on the concept of mother/father land. The concept of mother tongue is of European origin. In the sixteenth century when the clergymen standing on their 'Holy Alter' delivered speech or sermonized in any language other than Latin, it was called the mother tongue of mother church (e.g. Mother of God-virgin Mary). This mother tongue was therefore the vernacular. Ivan Illich has shown that the word had entered the Indian Territory only in 18th century.

In 1837 the British Government announced that all administrative communication under the rule of East Indian Company must be done in vernacular. The Fort William College was established to train the administrative officers in vernacular. In the Fort William College William Carry edited the specimen book.
entitled ‘Kothopokothan’ (Art of Conversation) to teach Bengali to the job seekers aspiring employment as clerks in the offices of the East India Company. This “Kothopokothan” remained a significant example of Bengali prose in the history of Bengali literature. The metaphysical structure of Bengali language and literature continued to grow centering round this college. But the Bengali prose that was being produced by the Sanskrit scholars to facilitate the trade and commerce of their ‘colonial masters’ was not successful because it was not really conversational language of the Bengali language of the then Bengal. It was actually a kind of Bengali prose which was heavily Sanskritised and hence incomprehensible to the commoners. For this reason sufficient Arabic and Persian words were included in the First edition of ‘Kothopokothan’. In the second edition it was found that Arabic and Persian word were replaced by Sanskrit words.\(^{15}\)

The Bengali language that emerged was thus a result of the collaboration of the English masters and Bengali subjects. This has been confirmed by a colonial grammarian himself. In 1872 John Beams said, “The Bengali language originally a rule off School of Magadhi-Prakrit has within the present century been much cultivated and enriches by revival of Sanskrit words. Many excellent books has also been written in it.”\(^{16}\) A critic feels that the development of Bengali language not only was a result of master-subject collaboration in Bengal but actually an imitation of the master by the subject in shaping his language. Thus the Bengalis prepared the language according to the requirement of their masters. Hence the trajectory of the Bengali language follows the trajectory of the English language.\(^{17}\) The master had developed the idea of mother tongue in Europe, so the subject also has developed the concept of mother tongue. The master had the idea of nation which he had derived from the idea of mother tongue. The subject also had formed the idea of a nation from the idea of mother tongue. The masters might write from any province of England but they write in the same language and the subject also prepared one standard language instead of many dailects so that all conversation related to trade and commerce could be conducted. To keep pace in every field the subject also required a historical base for his language, literature and nationhood like that of his master. Hence a history of the Bengali people was sought to be constructed. It was this need that made Bankim Chandra Chattapadhaya write, “Bengali requires a
history, otherwise the Bengali will never become complete man” and this will not be like kerry’s ‘Kothopokothan’ rather it must be like history of Bengal written by Marshman and translated as ‘Bangalar Ithas’ by Vidyasagar even before this subject started to write history. In 1869 Harimohan Mukhopadhay wrote ‘Kohicharit’, in 1871 and in the same year Mahendra Nath Chottopadhay wrote ‘Bongobashar Ithas’ and in between 1872 and 1873 Ramgathi Nayaratna wrote ‘Bangla Bhasha and Bangla Sahitya Bishayak Prastab’, Raj Narayan Bose wrote ‘Bangla Bhasha O Sahitya Bishayak Bakrita’ in 1876, ‘Literature of Bengal’ by Ramaes Chandra Dutta in 1877 and Dinesh Chandra Sen made this sequence more strong by writing his important book, ‘Bongo Basha o Sahitya’. The construction of a rich past was necessary to write a write history of its own self without which an appropriate nation building was not be possible. The subject would not have equal status of his master without similar proud history. Therefore even when they have a text like ‘Charyacharyabimschoy’ they needed the approval of the colonial rulers that its language was indeed Bengali. But other subject contested this by the same logic So Gopal Chandra Praharaj claimed that the language of ‘Charyacharyabimschoy’ was written in old Orya language. Rahul Sanskrittayan or Kali Prasad Jaiswal asserted that its language was Magadhi (A dialect of Bihari group) while Bani Kanta Kakati felt that it was written in Assamese. Shibnandan Tagore or Subhadra Jha was sanguine that it was ancient Maithili language and Kanaklal Boruah felt that this was an example of mixed form ‘Maithili Kamrupi’ language.

Language question cannot be isolated from overall nationality question. In all the definition of nationhood, language has been seen as an integral component. The other important component was territory. As nationalist discourse emerged as one of the most powerful discourses of modern world, territory was feminized and deified as mother land. Since then national territory did not remain a simple piece of land in this discourse, it became a sacred territory known as mother land and the language spoken by the inhabitants of that territory was seen as mother language. Although it is not known whether mother land was the precursor of mother language and vice versa, the organic relationship between the two was apparent. Thus nationhood involves the presence both of motherland as well as mother tongue. Although in the post modern times the importance of both has been questioned, they
had not lost their political relevance. What is ironical is that in a territory there was generally not one mother tongue. There is hardly a habitat which comprises of only one group of people. Most areas are plural and have speakers of multiple languages. Thus while mother tongue of the majority develops as dominant language of the area, others were suppressed. Therefore a mother tongue of a majority can be the carrier of Chauvinism and at the same time oppressor of minority language. Motherland would apply to the majority community who might object to the territorial rights of the other minority inhabitant of this same land. But the minority communities then used the same discourse and appropriate the concept of mother tongue and mother land for their land and land right and nationality right. The concept of mother tongue and mother land was immortalized in Bengal and later in India by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in the song “Bande Mataram” Similarly the concept of mother tongue was recognized and institutionalized by declaring 21st Feb as International mother Tongue by UNESCO on 17 November 1999, the day youths lost their lives in East Pakistan fighting for their mother tongue.

As far as Barak valley is concerned it consists currently of three districts – Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Earlier they all formed only one district called Cachar district of Assam. Karimganj became a part of Assam only in 1947 Cachar including Hailakandi was the habitat of diverse tribal and ethnic groups. Hailakandi is overwhelmingly Muslim, surrounded by a number of tribal groups While the Hindus and Muslim spoke a dialect of Bengali language known as Cachari-Sylheti, the tribal spoke a myriad variety of Indo-Burman languages. Similarly Cachar was the kingdom of the Dimasa rulers with Khaspur as their capital. This too is a largely multi ethnic region. Besides the Dimasa who spoke their Dimasa language, there was a large number indigenous Muslim population who constituted the functionaries and armed forces as well as revenue officials of the kingdom. A small number of Bengali Hindus comprise the priestly classes, all of whom spoke a dialect know as ‘Sylheti’ or ‘Cachari’, one of the dialects of the large Bengali language. Among the other indigenous population were the Naga, Chorai, Rangkhal, Khasi, Dimasa, riang, Muolansom, Garo, Chakma, Biata, Mizo, Imol, Karbi, Chiru, Ranglong, Halom, sakachepep, Tripura, Jayantia, uchodi, Rupini, Rajbanshi, Rangkhong, Kuki, and Kmar. During the Burmese invasion of Manipur
and Assam a large number Meithei, Bisnupriya, Rongmei, and Koch communities migrated and settled in Cachar. From 1856 tea began to be grown in Barak Valley. With the development of tea as an Industry a massive number of tea labour population were recruited through an indentured labour system were brought and settled in the tea gardens. These immigrants were from different tribal areas of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and even from South Indian provinces speaking diverse speeches. A small number Bengali Hindus were also settled as the managerial functionaries of the tea garden. The partition of India in 1947 witnessed massive number of displaced Bengali Hindus immediately emerged as the numerical majority in Cachar District. Though Cachar district was plural and multi linguistic, the numerical strength of the Bengali Hindus was able to establish the dominance of Bengali language. The Dimasa kings of the Cachar state were patrons of Bengali language and culture. They had already popularized Bengali language and often used it as the *Lingua Franca* of the people. Since Bengali was already an established language of this state, the dominance of Bengali language was only a matter of time. In the urban areas Bengali emerged as the medium of interaction of the people as well as of un-official instruction. Therefore when the resistance to the imposition of Assamese language was launched as a struggle for the survival of the mother tongue, there was no immediate opposition to it. But as the movement was analyzed in retrospect the non-inclusion of other language groups had become visible. There was a tacit withdrawal of support by the tea garden and tribal language groups. It made the features of the movement evident. The Hailakandi incident mentioned earlier was an example of the dominance of a particular religio-language group. No wonder the Hailakandi episode marked the temporary end of the so called “Bhasha Sangram” (Language movement).

**Language and martyrdom**

In all the three movements that we discussed, there was inevitable reaction from the State. Since the movement was a resistance to the policy of the state, there was immediate response from the state. The state tried to suppress the movement through coercive methods and treated this struggle as an attempt to violate law and order. The coercive repression from the state resulted in causalities. In the case of
East Pakistan there were four (4) deaths and in case of Cachar there were eleven (11) deaths. All these deaths were the result of police firing on unarmed demonstrators. These deaths were immediately given the status of martyrdom and the death was elevated to the status of language martyr. Both the date-21st Feb and 19th May - were observed as martyr day and even immortalized by construction of monument in memory of the martyrs.

Martyrdom has been defined “As a conscious attempt to embrace death for personal or political cause while it may appear a self negation, martyrdom is often an act of self aggrandizement to affirm the time honoured tradition of the community. Loyalty to communal tradition strengthened the personal and communal sense of honour and consolidate cultural vitality and historical continuity. Thus, through martyrdom a community regenerates itself.”

Martyrdom therefore, is not an incident but an involvement. According to Dorraj, “it is an imposed death on hero as well as tragedy and a medal of honour. It is not a means but an end.” It is genuine and elevating. It is great responsibilities, it is a short cut tool to elevate oneself above mankind. It is above all a culture.

Martyrdom is quite common in a number of religions. Jesus Christ was seen as the first martyr in human history. In Islam ‘Jihad’ and ‘Sahadat’ are connected. In such religious practices martyrdom is not a means but “a sacred end.” It is a statement about a faith, “It is a defined gesture renouncing the present order, itself actualization through negation.” The secular political group has in history used martyrdom as an effective theme to inculcate the idea of self sacrifices and dedication in their followers. It is necessary for the political struggler to depict the martyrs as the vanguard of the masses who through his or her sacrifice awaken the people. Often, therefore, martyrdom is constructed and simple deaths were conferred the honour of martyrdom thereby, endowing the dead with messianic qualities. Thereafter, a movement immortalizes the individual by publishing and prescribing the ideal of the martyr. Martyrdom has often been appropriated to achieve certain political end but also to maintain communal solidarity and loyalty. Historically martyr therefore, became a symbol which has integrative power as well as
instrumental in inculcating a sense of identity, culturally assimilated and significant force for political mobilization.\textsuperscript{31}

Despite the existence of the phenomenon of martyrdom for a very long period in history the words remain "mysterious, hard to define and highly explosive."\textsuperscript{132} Baldwin Smith feels that, "modern scholars refer the term self sacrifice to martyrdom largely because it reveals the complexities of the subject, what extent does the self gain by the act of sacrifice and is the sacrifice individualistic or communal and its motivation economic, political, religious or social? Martyrdom in contrast, in its strictest sense, the witnessing unto death of divine truth."\textsuperscript{33} Smith feels that martyrdom is a better word than self sacrifice because it is as much as a reward granted by the community as it is a display courage and endurance achieved by the individual in the face of torture and execution.\textsuperscript{34} Smith quotes St. Augustine to assert that it is not the penalty but the cause which makes a martyr over the centuries.\textsuperscript{35} However, martyrdom tended to gradually lose its religious orientation and increase its political potency. The early Christian derived their theory of martyrdom from the story of the death of Socrates and the Judaic legends of Eleazer and the Maccbean Brothers.\textsuperscript{36} The crucification of Christ was sought to be emulated to attain immortality. When Catholic man ascended the throne of England she persecuted the leaders of the Protestant Church who in their death attained martyrdom. Similarly, Mary was succeeded by Elizabeth-I and she executed the Catholics, interestingly not for their faith but for their treason.\textsuperscript{37}

In India the Sikh religion underscores a tendency for martyrdom for 'Sahidi.'\textsuperscript{38} Sikh history have presented 'Sahid' and 'Sahidi' as ideal to many contemporary Khalsa and non-Khalsa Sikh. The Sikh 'Sahid' or martyrs is a highly revered figure and unambiguous exemplar of virtue, truth and moral justification.\textsuperscript{39} Sikh 'Sahid' give their lives in upholding righteousness (Dharam) under most painful and chilling circumstances provide in testimony (Sahadat) to their faith and their blood. As with Christian and Muslim witness to the truth the unsought the reward the Sikh martyrs received such stalwart and courageous behavior in the face of torture and eminent death is liberation from the cycle of existence, union of union with God.\textsuperscript{40}
In modern times martyrs are mostly connected with nationalist struggle. In South Asia, a few hundred people have been killed by the colonial state for fighting for the cause of liberation from colonial rule or resisting the co-erosion of the colonial state. All such people have been given the status of martyr and then martyrdom immortalized through the construction of monuments, memorials and observing the dates of death as martyr’s day. Such monuments and memorials are not only used for invoking emotional response from the people and seeking their participation in nation building and most importantly seeking the peoples submission to the nation state that emerges after liberation from colonial rule. Interestingly the invocation of martyrs is often used to legitimate the rule of post colonial regimes. In the language movement discussed above the people killed in police firing were given the status of martyrs and their sacrifices are invoked to inspire the new generation to make similar sacrifices to resist similar imposition of alien language on them and fight for the right of mother tongue.

In East Pakistan four people had died in police firing and some others were injured. Some rumour spread the figure of the killed is more than 150. Most of whom we alleged to be student including many girls. It is further alleged the bodies were burned by petrol. As per the government press note it was found that only four people died as a result of bullet injuries during the two days of the disturbances and of which only one was a student. Particulars of the deceased person are as follows:

1. Name : Abdul Bakkar

   Age : 25 yrs.

   Date and place of firing: 21-02-1952, near medical college Hospital Dhaka.

   Profession : Student

   Cause of Death: Bullet injury

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2  Name  Rafiquddin  
   Age  -25 yrs  
   Date and place of firing. 21-02-1952, Babu lane Dacca,  
   Profession  Assisted his father in running a printing press  
   Cause of Death: bullet injury  

3. Name  Abdul Jabbar  
   Age  30 yrs.  
   Date and place of firing 21-02-1952 Babu Lane, Dacca  
   Profession  Petty Shopkeeper  
   Cause of Death: Bullet injury  

4  Name  Safiqur Rahman  
   Age  20yrs.  
   Date and place of firing: 22-02-1952, Nowabpur Road, Dhaka  
   Profession  Employee Dacca High Court  
   Cause of Death  Bullet injury  

On the third June, 1952 the government of East Bengal by a notification stated that with regard to the firing that took place on the 21st Feb, 1952 at Dacca and enquiry should be held by a judge of the Dacca High Court. On 25th May, 1952 the hon’ble justice T.H.Ellis submitted its report by stating, firstly, the firing by the police was necessary and secondly, the force used by the police was justified in the circumstance of the case.
Similarly in Barak Valley eleven people were killed in police firing of which some were killed accidentally, the people who died in the police firing on 19th May, 1961 and their details are as follows:

1. Name: Kamala Bhattacharjee
   Age: 16yrs
   Date and place of firing: 19-05-1961, Silchar Railway Station
   Profession: Student
   Cause of Death: Bullet injury

2. Name: Sachindra Paul.
   Age: 19yrs
   Date and place of firing: 19-05-1961, Silchar Railway Station
   Profession: Unemployed
   Cause of Death: Bullet injury

3. Name: Chandi Charan Sutradhar
   Age: 22 yrs
   Date and place of firing: 19-05-1961, Silchar Railway Station
   Profession: Carpenter
   Cause of Death: Bullet injury

4. Name: Kanailal Neogi
   Age: 37yrs
   Date and place of firing: 19-05-1961, Silchar Railway Station
   Profession: Railway employee
   Cause of Death: Bullet injury
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Date and place of firing</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Cause of Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hitesh Biswas</td>
<td>23yrs.</td>
<td>19-05-1961, Silchar Railway Station</td>
<td>Private employee</td>
<td>Bullet injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumud Das</td>
<td>18yrs.</td>
<td>19-05-1961, Silchar Railway Station</td>
<td>Tea Stall Boy</td>
<td>Bullet injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunil Dey Sarkar</td>
<td>16yrs</td>
<td>19-05-1961, Silchar Railway Station</td>
<td>Petty Merchant</td>
<td>Bullet injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satyendra Deb</td>
<td>24yrs.</td>
<td>19-05-1961, Silchar Railway Station</td>
<td>Private Servant</td>
<td>Bullet injury</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Name : Sukomal Purkayasta
   Age : 36yrs.
   Date and place of firing: 19-05-1961, Silchar Railway Station
   Profession : Businessman
   Cause of Death: Bullet injury

10. Name : Tarani Debnath
    Age : 21yrs.
    Date and place of firing: 19-05-1961, Silchar Railway Station
    Profession : Weaver
    Cause of Death: Bullet injury

11. Name : Birendra Sutradhar
    Age : 24yrs
    Date and place of firing: 19-05-1961, Silchar Railway Station
    Profession : Carpenter
    Cause of Death: Bullet injury

It is needed to be mentioned that on 19th May 1961 Kanailal Neogi, who was killed by police firing was a railway employee and had taken casual leave on that day to go to Pandu along with his family. But as the train could not move, he had to remain in Silchar Railway station and was watching the demonstration. He was killed by police firing accidentally. From his pockets a railway journey pass was found after death. Similarly some others, who were not protesters were also killed by police firing.

The N. C Chatterjee commission report reveals that the people who were killed by the police firing were not all demonstrators. According to the report of the commission, some people who were far away from the demonstration area also...
killed. Not only this, people inside their house and even on the top of overhead water tank was also killed by the police firing.\(^\text{45}\)

Immediately after the killing of some protesters, curfew was imposed in Silchar. It was declared from the administration that in order to maintain law and order and to protect the peace-loving people of Silchar and their lives and property, curfew was imposed. The Deputy Inspector General of Police in his statement says, “I rushed towards the railway platform then I found a very large congregation about 8000 strong. I ordered their dispersal and the Assam Rifles men made the charge. The mob started moving at this stage. I found five unarmed constables surrounded by a big crowd. They had gone in search of the lost gun leaving their own arms in the custody of the man in charge. So I ordered the Assam Rifles men to fire two rounds. This made the crowd start moving and the surrounded constables were rescued. At this stage, the crowd started pelting stones. Thinking that instead of Khaki-clad police if green-uniformed army men were made to take position this might have a salutary effect on the crowd, I requested the Officer-in-Charge to order his men to take position. He refused until his command was signed. I told him, I did not mean actual firing and wanted the men to take position only to terrify the mob and again asked him to take position for God’s sake. At this agreed and his men took position. At that time, the Jemander of the police force asked me about the steps to be taken. I gave permission to fire and it was done in my presence. In all 17 rounds were fired.”\(^{46}\)

The news of the incident of Silchar reached every corner of the world through “All India Radio,” “BBC,” “Voice of America,” “Radio Picking,” “Radio Pakistan.” The situation became so tense that people of the Valley spent sleepless night on that day. Next day i.e. 20th May the entire valley observed strike. The students of B A Standard decided to boycott their final exam. The demand for justice and the trial of the killer was raised by the protesters. The volunteers used black badge and raised black flag in their houses. The local merchants stop the supply of food and other things to police and other forces. The police and the administrative offices who were involved in the repression were socially boycotted. In Silchar and Karimganj jail along with arrested demonstrators, the other prisoners
also fasted in protest against the police firing and met in a condolence meeting in the evening. Amongst the arrested leaders of Sangram Parishad, Ratindra Sen, Malini Kanta Das, Bidu Bushan Choudhury, Nisit Ranjan Das, Jitendra Nath Choudhury took the oath of continuing their struggle till the end of their life and offered their tribute to the language martyrs.47

After the police firing the dead and injured people were brought to Silchar Civil Hospital and the people guarded them and even D.I.G. of Police could not enter the operation theatre because of the protestor. The dead bodies were kept amidst tight security and were not permitted to bring them out on that day.

Next day from the dawn thousands of people came out and on watching the tendency of peoples rush and their sentiments the administration withdraw curfew. At about 11 a.m. after the postmortem the dead bodies were handed over to the demonstrators. A precession of not less than forty thousand people marched through the town with the dead bodies of the picketers. There were chanting slogan in memory of the dead and demanded for an enquiry in to the matter.

The Communist Party of India (Cachar District) condemned the police firing and appeal to the people (a) to wear black badge for next seven days, (b) to raise black flag in each and every houses, (c) to declare martyr day and observe total strike, no-cooking and fasting and to organize silent procession, (d) to be non-violent and continue to fight for the demand and to make demand of stopping repression, use of military, and free movement of people, to attain permission for organizing meetings etc. The party gave emphasis on the unity of the people and to continue the language movement after 19th May’s incident.

The Sangram Parishad of Silchar announced a weak long protest programme and appealed to the people to make it success. In order to spread the news of the programme amongst the people leaflets were distributed which was signed by Poritosh Paul Choudhury. In the leaflet it declared that (a) Sangram Parishad pay their tribute who gave their life for the cause of mother tongue, (b) Those who injured were not alone, the people were with them, (c) The government should pay due honour and financial compensation to the families of the dead (d) Monuments
must be constructed for each dead to commemorate their sacrifice and the municipality must provide land and it was appeal to the people to donate for the construction, (e) The movement be continued till the demand fulfilled, (f) To continue the movement a fund of Rs.25000 be needed and asked the people to send money to Mahitosh Purkaysta, (g) The Sangram Parishad was the sole organization authorised to talk with the Government on the issue of language, movement and the victims., (h) To keep faith on Sangram Parishad as the Parishad would not compromise on Language issue Curfew and section 144 to be withdrawn as the Parishad had never encouraged violent movement, (i) The proposed movement to be started from 22nd May, 1961 (j) In this week long programme wearing of black badge, condolence meeting, raising of black flag, non-cooperation with the administration were declared and (k) In next announcement the day for total strike would be declared.

The railway workers on 21st May observed as no-working day in protest against the firing and killing of 19th may. The Silchar and Karimganj Bar association sent a memorandum to the Prime Minister demanding the appointment of an enquiry commission under a judge of Supreme Court to enquire the cause of police firing and killing of 11 people

It was also decided by the Cachar district Gana Sangram Parishad to continue their protest movement not only in Silchar but also in other places of the valley. The supporters of the movement in Hailakandi and Karimganj also followed the same as protesters of Silchar had done. To make the movement more alive and sensitive the leaders of Sangram Parishad decided to travel all the places of the valley with the ashes of the dead bodies of language movements. Accordingly on 22nd May the ashes reached in Badarpur and then to Karimganj town. In both the places thousands of people marched throughout the town with the ashes of the deceased. In Karimganj about 40,000 people walked bare footed through the town and then stored the silver pot containing ashes in a temple. Like this the ashes were carried throughout the valley and then on 29th May these were thrown in to the river after observing some rituals. A group of leaders of the movement took the ashes to Agartala and other places outside the Barak Valley to spread the movement and to get support in the
Bengali dominated areas. On 16th June the leaders of Sangram Parishad held a
meeting and decided to postpone the movement for next three months as the then
Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri agreed on some demands of the Sangram
Parishad. As desired by the Home Minister the meeting also decided to send a 12
members delegation to Delhi to meet with the home minister and the Prime Minister

On completion of one month of the incident of 19th May the Sangram
Parishad organized rally, meetings, condolence etc. in some places of the valley and
since then the dead were seen as language martyrs and the day was started
observing as language martyr’s day.

Thus the language movement in Barak Valley ended in a tragedy. One of the
major ingredients of martyrdom is the prevalence of tragedy and an endeavor at
“Immortalizing defeat”. In the struggle between the people and the state, people
were defeated by the coercive power of the state resulting in a tragedy of death and
injury of protesters. This tragedy was then immortalized through the construction of
memorials and monuments. Any nationalist or sub-nationalist movement needs
monuments. These monuments are created through the politicization of death. In the
above cases deaths were politicized and converted into martyrdom. Ironically the
state provided these opportunities to the protester by using their coercive powers.
Memorializing is an important feature of nationalist political cultures. Nationalist
movement requires memorials to perpetuate this movement and sustained its legacy.
The language movement in Barak Valley would have perhaps ended with killings of
19th May. But the conferment of martyrdom to the 11 dead persons, created the
necessary memorials on the basis of which the movement could rise like a phoenix
and rediscover itself after the 19th May episode. On the one hand martyrdom and
martyrs movements were seen as symbol of state repression and on the other
remained people of the ‘sacrifices’ the protesters of 19th May made. In fact this
martyrdom become an inspiration as well as catalyst for further movements. Thus
language movement continued in different forms again in 1972 and after. It has also
become a rallying point separate state movement in Barak Valley as well as
university demand movement. Martyrdom was thus a part of the politics of memory
and memorializing.
Since it was a tragedy it necessarily generated the required emotions to continue the movement and the memorializing also helps propagate the ideals of the movements. Such external supports are necessary to reinvigorate the movement. Such an emotional issue could easily found support in other Bengali speaking areas of the neighborhood. Thus while East Pakistan fondly remembered the Language Movement of Barak Valley, a park in Calcutta (West Bengal) was named as ‘Basha Shahid Park’ (Language Martyrs Park). The greatest triumph came when All Assam Student Union (AASU) which was the originator of the idea introduction of Assamese as the state language against which the language movement was fought and consequently created a permanent polarization between the Assamese and the Bengali community has in 2011 recognized the Bengali Language Martyrs as martyrs of Assam and demanded it to be celebrated as martyrs day in the state.

MOVEMENT

The demand for recognition to their respective vernacular in the areas studied above had stated as assertion of linguistic patriotism but ended as a national or sub-national movement. In East Pakistan it grew to be a movement for regional autonomy which than graduated to become a full fledged nationalist struggle where West Pakistan was depicted as an internal colonial power. The movement become violent and was labeled as a freedom struggle which eventually wrested its sovereignty from the West Pakistan regime. A vernacular movement thus transformed into nationalist movement, it succeeded in establishing a new nation state called Bangladesh. In Manbhum and Barak Valley the vernacular movement succeeded in stalling the government design of imposing another language on them. In Barak Valley the government tried to introduce the same policy in different and weaker forms, but have not been so far successful in Barak Valley. In the meantime the political configuration of Assam state has also undergone several transformations as a result of the Language policy. There was several protest movement, along with Barak Valley, in other parts of the state as well. These protest movement changed into autonomy demand resulting into the balkanization of Assam. Three new states - Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Mizoram- were created out of Assam. Three other districts -Bodoland, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao- have also demanded
autonomy. While some were already been granted so others are about to be sanctioned the autonomy. As a result of these multiple autonomy demand the area speaking Assamese language has become very small in which the Assamese hegemony do not face any challenges or threats. Hence the necessity of establishing Assam state as an Assamese speaking unilingual state had become redundant. Therefore the imitative of imposing Assamese language on non-Assamese people have also held back.

All the Vernacular movement studied above was essentially middle class movement. It is the middle class which is concern about maintain their linguistic hegemony. The lower classes generally speak a language which is rooted to their soil. These are known as dialects. Though Bengali is known as a language, its standardized version was only an invention of the 19th century. It was standardized in the Calcutta region of West Bengal in the 19th century by the leading intelligentsia of the language. Its reformation started with Ram Mohan Roy and completed by Rabindra Nath Tagore. But this is only the Bengali print language. These language is spoke only in an around Calcutta. In the rest of Bengal a variety of dialects are spoken. Most of the dialect speakers are not even familiar with its standardized version. Hence these rural and lower classes of people, whom education had not yet reached, were not much bothered about the state policy as it did not affect them much. Despite the state policy they retain the right to speak their dialect and since schooling and higher education were hardly accessible to them. They were not aware of the implication of governmental policy. That is why the protest movement in East Pakistan and Barak Valley did not have much appeal to them. Therefore, they neither participated in the movement nor was there any move to include them. It remains an affair of the urban areas and confined to middle classes.

In Bangladesh, however the movement immediately caught the imagination of the rural folks as soon as the issues of exportation, discrimination and national oppression were brought in. As a result the movement did not remain confined to language and become more broad based and inclusive where vernacular symbol of nationalism, where the language of the rulers was the symbol of oppression. The movement would thus change from vernacular movement to nationalist struggle.
did not happen in Barak Valley because the question of exploitation and national oppression could not be brought in. The idea of discrimination by the Assamese ruled state over Bengali speaking Barak Valley was floated but this too did not find wide spread reception in the rural areas. It was confined to the middle class. Since the Bengali leaders from Barak Valley were also part of the government in Shillong, people saw it as a complicit collaboration between the Assamese and Bengali leaders to exploit the deprived classes. The other feature of the vernacular movement in Barak Valley was the non recognition of multi language character of the valley and consequent non-inclusion of the non-Bengali speaking groups. As has already been shown above Barak Valley is hugely multi-lingual. There are a massive number of languages, both Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman spoken in the valley. Even the Bengali that is spoken by the indigenous Bengali population was Cachari or Sylheti which was not seen as standardized or non-elite Bengali. The leaders while fighting for the cause of their vernacular, fought for the standardized version of Bengali language and did not bother to explain him the imposition of Assamese language would impact the dialect speakers. The tea garden population spoke a pidgin language known as ‘Sadri’ or ‘Bagania’. They did not have any affinity with vernacular movement of the Bengali. Thus a major section of the population remained outside the movement, besides there were Maithis, Bishnupriya Manipuris and Tibeto-Burman speaking tribal all of whom remained outside the purview of the movement. This exclusion had actually weakened the movement and after the 19[15] May incident, despite the emotion involved it became difficult to revive it. In fact, some of the tea garden leaders saw the language movement as an attempt to establish Bengali hegemony in Barak Valley. Therefore, they saw the movement as a threat.

The movement was also created confusion. Just before the declaration of the Assam Government about the introduction of the Assamese language, the Government of India had already declared Hindi to be the national language of India. This had huge implications. It meant thenceforth Hindi was going to be the language of instruction as well as official correspondence. While for the Hindi speaking population it was a huge advantage, for the non-Hindi speakers it was an imposition. Entire southern and western India broke out in uprising against this policy of state
compelling the Centre to reverse the policy and introduce a three-language formula. Surprisingly, the organization which led the protest movement against the Assamese language not only accepted the imposition but also welcomed it. It was strange that Bengali speakers of Barak Valley were amenable to the introduction of Hindi language. But the same group opposed when Assamese was introduced. This duality was not comprehended by many and some saw the protest movement as a part of the history of Assamese-Bengali hostility in Assam.51

The movement leadership failed to rope in the Muslims of the belt. The indigenous Muslims had already experienced the large scale migration of Bengali Hindu after partition in Barak Valley and the consequent reduction of the Muslims to a minority. They still were guided by the politics of the colonial periods. In the colonial periods when ever there was a move to transfer Sylhet and Cachar back to Bengal, the Muslim leader of Sylhet and Cachar opposed it on the ground that (1) They would lose the advantages they have in Assam, (2) These would reduce the numerical strength of the Brahmaputra Valley immigrants Muslim. Similarly, during the partition the Hailakandi Muslims preferred to transfer to East Pakistan but on the question of geographical continuity and as the district was retained in Assam. The non-inclusion of the Muslims in the movement made them see the movement essentially as a Bengali Hindu movement. The subsequent association of the vernacular movement with demand of union territory threatened them more. They felt that in the event of constitution of a union territory in Cachar the Muslims of the Valley would be reduced to an insignificant minority and ‘immigrant’ community of Bengali Hindus would grasp the power of the state.52

Similar was the case with a large number of depressed classes of Barak Valley. The depressed classes comprising of Kaibartas, Maimal, and Nath Yogi communities were once dominant communities of Barak Valley. With the coming of the Bengali Hindus after partition these community had not only been reduced to be a minority they also lost their means of subsistence. A large portion of their land has been transferred to the new settlers and their traditional occupation like fishing and boating were lost. They had no access to modern education or other amenities provided by the state. The failure of the leadership to include them also weakened the
movement. However, the movement was successful in inspiring a whole new genre of creative literature in Bengali language in both South Assam and Bengal and was also successful in establishing language rights and nationality aspiration. It had inspired vernacular movements in region most notable being the Bodo Language movement and the Bisnupriya language Movement.

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18 Ibid
19 Ibid, pp. 15-16
20 Karat Prakash, Language and Nationality Politics, Orient Longman, Hyderabad. p. 1
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47 Ibid, p.93

48 Dorraj, op.cit.

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50 Ibid

51 Interview with a Manipuri Household in Lakhipur of Cacher district, Dhareswar Singh, 71 years old on 5th March, 2010

52 Interview with a Retd. Teacher, Md. Sirajul Islam, 76 years old, of Algapur, Hailakandi, on 15th March, 2011