



The May 19, 1961, agitation at Silchar Rail Station

PHOTO: EISAMAY

BLOOD FOR BANGLA

As we prepare to commemorate the sacrifices of some brave young Bangalees in that defining year of 1952, we cannot but bear in mind some other realities. Bangalees also in India's Barak valley and Manbhum have laid down their lives, protesting assaults on their language. How many of us are aware of such hard truths? Today, we recount those tales of commitment and valour.

The valley of sacrifice

WIDE ANGLE DESK

A river is called Barak. A date frozen in the calendar is May 19, 1961. In the morning that day, when the world woke up to celebrate the birth centenary of its poet-laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, the two banks of Barak rose to an wake up call to defend its legitimate right to sing in Tagore's language, to dream in Tagore's words, to live a Bangalee life. In the railway track of the district town, Silchar of the then undivided district of Cachar of Assam, ten young men and a woman fell down to the bullets of the state police.

That young woman, aged only 16, is Kamala Bhattacharya, the youngest and the first woman language martyr of the world.

Barak Valley was a rather newish christening for erstwhile Cachar district. This tract of land in the southern periphery of Assam is home to about four million people, 80 percent of them speak Bangla and spread over the three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi.

Language, it is a known fact, is the Achilles' Hill in the whole of the northeast India where the process of building sub-nationality has, for the last one hundred years or so, veered around language apart from ethnicity. The historical sequence started with the assertion of Assamese nationalism during the dawn of the twentieth century which was pitted against the Bangla-speaking community out of paranoia. The British colonial design was the mastermind behind sowing the seeds of anti-Bangalee sentiments among the Assamese middle class. Economic factors further aggravated the deprivation theory which continued throughout the remaining part of the pre-colonial and also well into the post-colonial Assam.

The fear psychosis that the Bangalee domination would not only close the avenues of employment for the Assamese youth, but, more than that, would surely destroy the Assamese language and culture drove the political rulers of Assam to take anti-Bangalee steps on numerous occasions. And the worst of it happened in 1960 when the Assam Government passed the nefarious Official Language Act, making Assamese the only official state language other than English. The people of the then Cachar district went all out in protest against this Act the provisions of which they rightly felt would deprive them of their legitimate linguistic right. It was a mass upsurge and the chauvinist Assam Government came down heavily on the democratic movement. Situation went to a grave pass



KAMALA BHATTACHARYA

when on 19 May 1961 police resorted to firing on unarmed Satyagrahis in Silchar Railway Station that left eleven people dead.

In the face of more intensified democratic agitation aided by popular support from all over the country, the Assam Government finally yielded. In that year itself suitable amendment was brought in to the Official Language Act 1960, accommodating Bangla as the official language for the whole of Cachar district.

But, unfortunately, the xenophobic mindset of the State Government did not change and, as a result, clandestine designs of infringing on the linguistic right of the Bangalee of Assam have remained unabated in the state. On 17 August 1972, one more language activist laid down life in Karimganj in protest against the circular of Gauhati University which sought to make Assamese the only medium of instruction in the state colleges.

On 21 July 1986, two more brave souls sacrificed their lives in Karimganj during a protest against the draconian Board of Secondary Education of Assam circular which struck down Bangla as one of the media of instruction in the state school education.

On 16 March 1996, one woman activist embraced martyrdom in the Valley for the cause of her mother tongue, Bishnupriya Manipuri.

This territory of Barak Valley thus has a glorious tradition of language movement spanning a half-a-century period.

As for Kamala, the day after her matriculation exams ended, a picketing was being organised in Silchar railway station demanding Bangla as the medium of education. So, after taking her bath Kamala wore a sari of her elder sister Pratibha and prepared to go picketing. Her elder sister warned her of possible dangers. In the meanwhile, a group of 20-22 girls came to their house to take her. They alleviated her

mother's concerns and took Kamala along with them. Kamala's mother gave her a piece of cloth to defend herself from teargas. Kamala's younger sister Mangala, younger brother Bakul and her nephew Bappa too accompanied the group.

The rail blockade passed off peacefully in the morning. In the afternoon, the Assam Rifles began to arrive at the railway station. Around 2:35pm the paramilitary police started beating the protesters with rifle butts and batons without any provocation from them.

Hit by the police, Kamala's younger sister fell to the ground and began crying for help. The police had opened fire on the protesters by then. As Kamala rushed to the rescue of her sister, a bullet pierced through her eye and hit her head. Kamala was taken to hospital where she died.

Unconscious Mangala too was admitted to hospital, where she regained her consciousness after one month. She became mentally unstable for the rest of her life.

In 2011, marking the golden jubilee of the sacrifice of 19 May 1961, a bronze bust of Kamala Bhattacharya was unveiled on the premises of the Chhotelal Seth Institute.

Sources: Eisamay, unishemay.org and other Indian sites.



The rise of Purulia

SHAHTUB SIDDIQUE ANIK

Bangla bhasha praner bhashare/Marbi tora ke tare/Ei bhashatei kaj cholecche/Saat purusher amole/ Ei bhasahatei mayer kole/ Mukh futeche ma bole ... (My Bangla, O the language of my soul// Who dares to wipe you out// It's this language// that worked for us for seven generations// And we gone to sleep in our mother's arms// And called her Ma.)

This is a Tusu song. Like Jhumur and Bhadu, Tusu is a variety of folk songs from Purulia. Tusu songs are sung for whole night of Makar Sankranti, the last day of the month of Paus in Bangla calendar.

Like many other folk numbers, traditional Tusu songs pass from generation to generation. In most cases, the original lyricists or composers remain unknown.

But since the late 1940s till mid-1950s, Purulia, then Manbhum, gave birth to some never-heard-before Tusu songs, totally different in lyrical contents. They dealt with political and social issues and gave expression to a movement that, too, was never seen before. The one mentioned at the beginning of the article is one such song.

Although a tribal area, Manbhum had a significant Bangalee population, speaking its mother tongue and practising its own culture. Even the various tribes spoke Bangla.

An erstwhile part of Bengal presidency, Manbhum was placed under Bihar state after the 1947 partition. The Bangla-speaking people of Manbhum received a shock. God knows whose idea this was, the state imposed restrictions on the use of their mother tongue!

Bangalee officers were transferred to the other districts of Bihar. A ruling was issued to teach Hindi from primary classes; Bangla department was closed in the local zila school. Hindi was made compulsory for notice boards in schools and businesses. Hindi was declared the official language of Manbhum district. Do they all sound too familiar?

They do. The announcement that Urdu would be the official state language triggered serious discontent among the Bangalee population of the then East Pakistan and gave rise to the Great Bhasha Andolon of 1948-52.

Likewise, the Bangalees in Manbhum could not accept Hindi being imposed upon

them. On June 14, 1948, the Lok Sevak Sangha was established to protect Bangla language as well as to fight the state policy of forcible imposition of Hindi.

The Sangha started demonstrating at various levels in various forms. The most remarkable form was the Tusu Satyagraha Andolan -- a cultural revolution, a political fight, and an anti-authoritarian social agitation and a language movement, all at once. Love for own language and culture was at its core.

US folk legend Pete Seeger once said, "Throughout history, the leaders of countries have been very particular of what songs should be sung. We know the power of songs."

And the Manbhum people knew the power of their songs. Almost every corner of it was reverberated with Tusu songs, solely dedicated for the movement. A book titled "Tusu Gaaney Manbhum" was a very significant publication of the

Bihar activists called strikes in Manbhum for 17-20 June 1956. Pro-Bengal activists were not very happy either with the proposed accession of Dhanbad district to Bihar.

In the meantime, Chief Minister of West Bengal Bidhan Chandra Roy and Chief Minister of Bihar Shrikrishna Singh came up with a unique proposal of unification of West Bengal with Bihar.

In protest, the Lok Sevak Sangha started a non-violent march on foot, the famous "Padyatra", to Kolkata from Pakbirra village on April 20, 1956. The procession of 1,005 supporters reached Kolkata on May 7, 1956, and the authorities readily put them in jail.

Subsequently, the proposal for unification of West Bengal with Bihar was withdrawn. The "Bengal-Bihar Border Demarcation" bill was passed in parliament on August 17, 1956, and in Rajya Sabha on August 28, 1956.



ATUL CHANDRA



LABANYA PRABHA



ARUN CHANDRA

time. All of its one lakh copies sold fast. One song in particular turned iconic: "Shun Bihari bhai/ Tora rakhte larbi dang dekhai/ Tora apon tore bhed barai/ Bangla bhasay dili chhai..." (Hark, hey brother of Bihar// You can't chain us; we've no fear// For your own sake this thick wall you drew// And ashes in my Bangla threw.)

Music was the main weapon of the Tusu Satyagraha Andolon. While the movement was nearing its peak, the Bihar state government let loose repression. 1954 was the fiercest year for the activists. Torture and arrest of men and women involved in the movement were a daily matter. Rallies were banned. But the agitation never stopped.

Finally, the central government declared the formation of the "State Re-Organisation Commission". In 1955, the commission proposed the formation as well as the accession of a new district "Purulia," dominated by Bangla-speaking people, to West Bengal from the erstwhile Manbhum of Bihar.

This drew mixed reactions. Pro-

Finally, with 16 police stations, 2,007 square mile area and a population of 11,69,097, the new district of Purulia was acceded to West Bengal on November 1 that year.

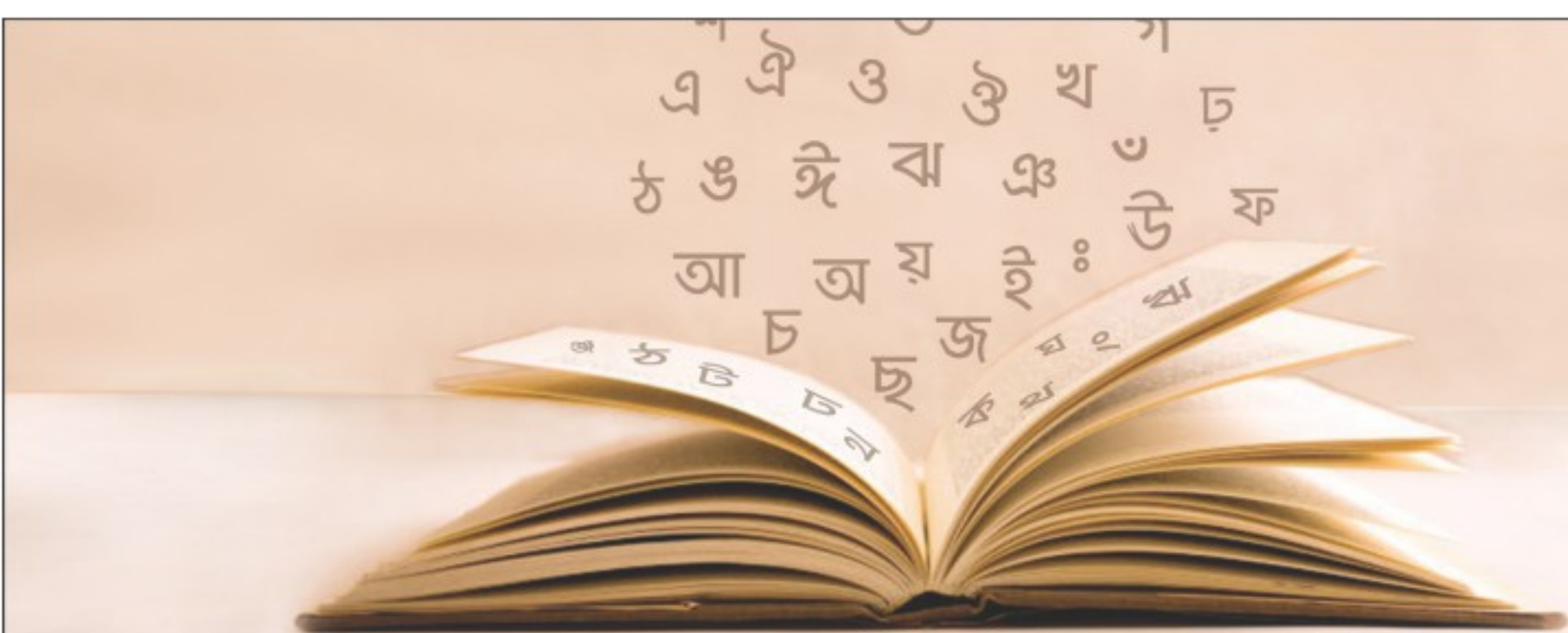
THE LEGENDS

Atul Chandra Ghosh, president of the Lok Sevak Sangha from its inception, was the chief architect of the march. He was a prominent figure also during the freedom struggle of the colonial era.

His wife Labanya Prabha Ghosh, lovingly addressed as "Manbhum Janani" (mother of Manbhum) by the people of Purulia, was another top leader of the language movement. The Bihar government sent her to jail several times.

Their eldest son Arun Chandra Ghosh was another noted figure. He also edited "Mukti," the first Bangla bi-weekly from Manbhum, till his death. The publication played a great role during the movement.

Sources: Purulia district portal; article of Dr Shanti Singh; Indian newspapers and sites



বই শক্তি, বই মুক্তি

আমরা বিশ্বাস করি, বাংলা ভাষা এবং সাহিত্য ও সংস্কৃতি চর্চার পথ বেয়েই পরিপূর্ণ বিকাশ হবে আমাদের দেশীয় চেতনার। সৃজনশীলতা ও চেতনার জাগরণে আমাদের আস্থা অবিলম্বে।