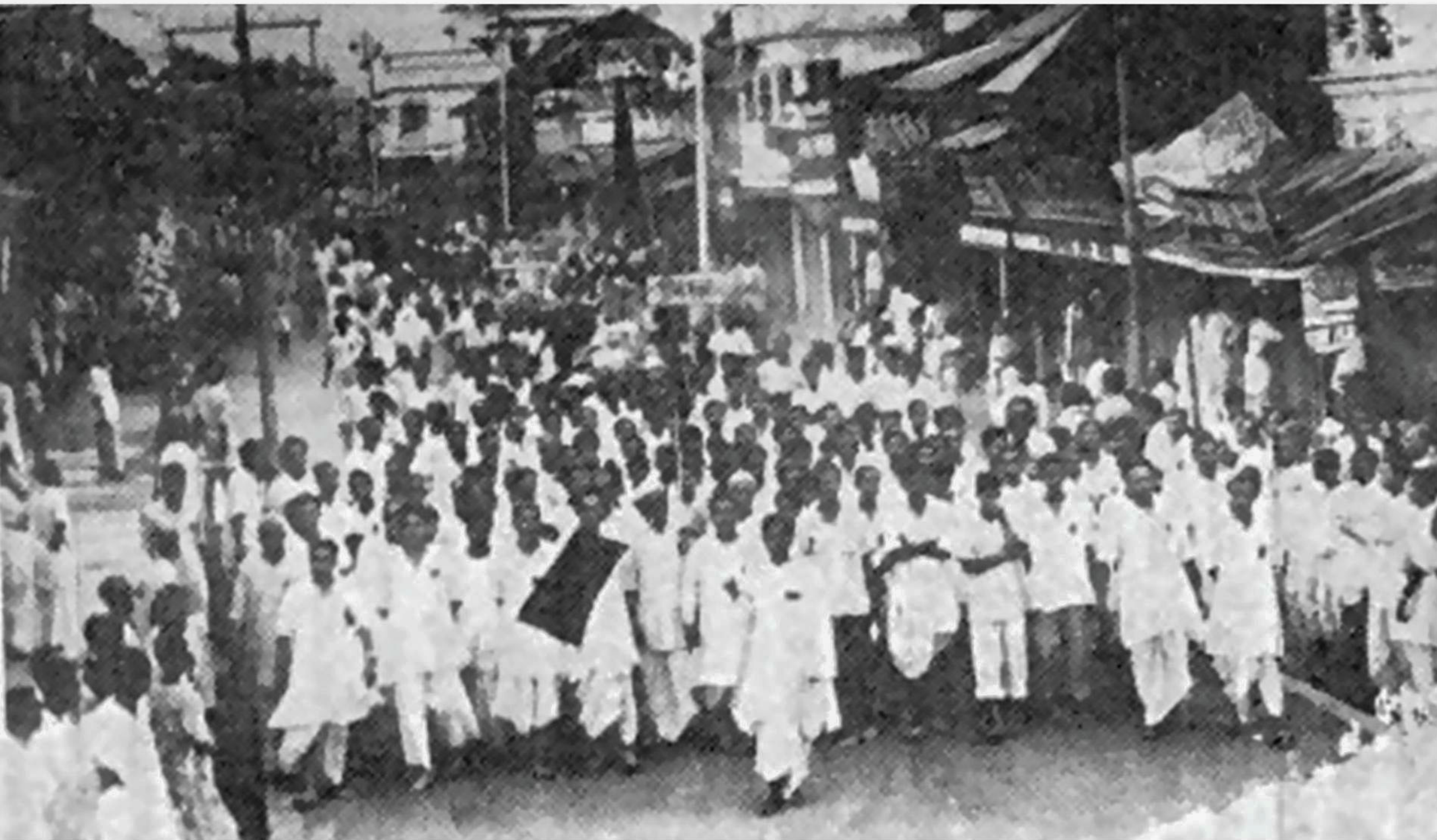




The forgotten revolutions



Procession in Silchar on 20 May 1961 in memory of the deceased martyrs in defiance of the curfew.

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

ON 21st February, 1952 Pakistani police opened fire at a procession of students and killed a number of the protesters. The protest for mother tongue that shed blood in the streets of Dhaka, then a provincial capital of Pakistan, changed the course of history of this subcontinent. Besides paving the way for independent Bangladesh, the movement inspired millions of Bengali speaking people in India, especially in Assam and Bihar, to start their own fight to protect linguistic and cultural rights. Along with Bengali speaking people, people of different ethnic groups also started their struggles. In fact, the language movement in the then East Bengal created an explosion of similar movements in different parts of India. But the story of these brutally suppressed protests for their mother tongue Bengali is hardly remembered in the celebrations of International Mother Language Day.

In this century of Universal Human Rights, it is hard to imagine that an individual of a particular race is forced to adopt another language for his/her survival. However, after achieving independence from British Raj in 1947, this cultural discrimination was becoming evident in both the newly formed countries, Pakistan and India.

The struggle was particularly obvious in Pakistan where the government declared Urdu as the only state language in a country where Bengalis comprised around 54% of the state population. Urdu language and culture was almost alien to this race of rich culture and tradition. So, when the declaration of Urdu as the state language came in 1948, a strong protest from the then East Bengal alarmed Pakistani rulers. But they did not budge from their position. Founding figure of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, came to Dhaka University and uttered stubbornly, "Urdu and Urdu will be the only state language of Pakistan," and he faced similar revolting reply from the audiences. They replied, "No, No, No!" and the movement for mother tongue started in Pakistan.

As a result, millions of Bengalis from all walks of life, in every town and district, protested to protect their right to speak, read and write in Bengali. They protested to recognise their beloved language, which was at that time the language of more than 44 million out of 69 million people of Pakistan, as one of its state language. After the bloodbath of 21st February

1952, the Pakistani government finally succumbed to the determined Bengali protesters. They recognised Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. This successful and unique struggle for the mother tongue created many potential leaders and intellectuals who later shaped Bangladesh's ultimate emancipation through the liberation war of 1971.

However, like Pakistan, India is also the home of hundreds of ethnicities and cultures. In many parts of India, these peoples were and still are not happy with the government's treatment of their language and culture. Particularly and like in Pakistan, the Bengali speaking people of India felt deprived of their linguistic rights. The agitation among the Indian Bengalis gave birth to some of the most significant and tragic movements in the history of this subcontinent.

THE BENGALI LANGUAGE MOVEMENT IN BARAK VALLEY, ASSAM:

In April 1960, a proposal was raised at the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee to declare Assamese as the sole official language of the state. On 10 October 1960, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, the then Chief Minister of Assam, presented a bill in the Legislative Assembly that sought to legalise Assamese as the only state language of Assam. Despite protests from other legislators on the ground that it would impose the language of a third of the population over the rest two thirds, the bill was passed on 24th October.

This initiated a violent riot between ethnic Assamese and Bengalis of the province. As a result of the riot, 50,000 Hindu Bengalis were evicted from Brahmaputra valley and took refuge in West Bengal. Another 90,000 Bengalis fled to Barak Valley and to the other regions of north-eastern India. In the next year, the surviving Bengalis of Assam regrouped and reorganised their movement for the mother tongue. On February 5, 1961 a committee of the protesters called Cachar Gana Sangram Parishad was formed to organise people against the imposition of Assamese language. The committee with thousands of activists launched road march and travelled to different districts of Assam such as Shilchar, Karimganj, and Haliakandi etc. After gathering huge support, the committee declared that if Bengali is not recognised as the state language, it would observe general strike in the state. It also called for the linguistic rights of other ethnic minori-

ties of Assam.

The soldiers of Assam Rifles arrived to suppress the movement on 12th May and police arrested the prominent leaders of the movement namely Nalinikanta Das, Rathindranath Sen and Bidhubhushan Chowdhury, the editor of weekly Yugashakti. On 19th May the strike started amidst protest and mass arrest by the police and paramilitary forces. However, the protesters formed human chain and set road blocks. At the railway station, the protest was particularly intense where some of the protesters set fire on a police truck and released some of their arrested comrades. The paramilitary force guarding the railway station started beating the protesters with rifle butts and batons. After cornering the protesters, they fired 17 rounds of bullets at the cornered crowd. A total of eleven protesters died from bullet wounds and nine of them died on the



Baton charge on the protesters at Tarapur Railway station, Assam, 1961

spot. Many others were severely injured by bullets, bayonets and batons.

After the tragic incident, the Assamese government withdrew the circular and gave Bengali the official status in the Barak Valley. This tragic massacre is considered as the second Jalianwalabag where British occupying forces opened fire at the crowd of non violent protesters.

THE MANBHUM UPRISING

In 1947 when India became independent, Manbhum district (now Purulia of West Bengal) was a part of Bihar state. Like Pakistan, Bengali speaking people of the district started to suffer as the state government imposed restrictions on Bengali. The aggression of Hindi lan-

guage and culture agitated the local Bengalis. On 30th May, 1948 the proposal to make Bengali a state language was cancelled in the legislative council. Tension rose in the district and agitated people formed an organisation called Lok Sevak Sangha. The government imposed further restriction on Bengali language in educational institutions. Bengali department in schools and colleges were closed. Urdu and Hindi were made compulsory to learn in primary classes. Rallies and processions were also banned in the state.

But Bengalis by that time had had enough. Hundreds and thousands of Bengalis participated in the language movement in Manbhum at various levels. One of the major parts of this movement was Satyagraha Andolon (Non-violent agitation movement). A key component of this activism was music. Through various folk songs like Tusu, Jhumur and Bhadu, the protesters

of prisoners were seen in the streets of Manbhum taken to jail singing, (Shun Bihari-bhai / Tora Rakhte Larbi / Dang Dekhai... .. (O Bihari-brothers/ You cannot keep us in Bihar / We are showing you sticks... ..)).

After a continuous movement of more than five years, on 23rd December 1953, the central government formed a "state re-organisation commission." Two years later, on 10th October, 1955 the commission recommended a separate district called Purulia under West Bengal be formed which would accommodate the Bengali speaking people of Bihar. The next year on 1st November, 1956 the Purulia district was separated from Manbhum district and was acceded into West Bengal. However, a large number of Bengali speaking populations still remained in different parts of Bihar and even in some areas of Manbhum district such as Dhanbad. Besides, peasant movement against social authoritarianism that sparked during the movement still threatens the stability of the region as the issue remained unresolved.

Like Bihar, in many other parts of India anti-Hindi agitations had been continuing for decades. People of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu have been struggling for their linguistic rights since 1937. Their anti Hindi agitations in 1965, 1968 and 1986 had claimed human lives and caused sufferings. Even in 2014, Indian government ordered that "government employees and officials of all ministries, departments, corporations or banks, who have made official accounts on social networking sites should use Hindi, or both Hindi and English but give priority to Hindi" ("Home Ministry asks bureaucrats to use Hindi on social networking sites". Aman Sharma: 17 June 2014). Finding no place for their mother tongue, Tamil, common people and all the political parties of the state opposed this move and the struggle continues today.

The right to live with the mother tongue is a basic right for human beings. Valiant sons of our soil have established this right as an example to the rest of the world. But it is very unfortunate that while we are celebrating the international mother language day, thousands of peoples around us are still struggling for their linguistic existence. We remember the contributions of those who struggled to establish this right and we respect those who are still struggling for it.