

FORGOTTEN MARTYRS

Language Movement Revisited

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FEBRUARY 21 HAS BEEN declared as the “International Mother Language Day” by the United Nations Organisation (UNO) in 1999 in order to honour the February 21, 1952 language movement in the former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) when several students of Dacca University became martyrs for the cause. Bangladesh is one of the members of UNO after the bloody secession of East Pakistan in 1971. Because of Bangladesh, Bengali became one of the official languages of UNO. Martyrs never die morally and spiritually. They are immortal in the minds of men and women.

Unfortunately, the man who initiated Bengali language movement is sadly forgotten. He was Dhirendranath Dutta of Comilla (now in Bangladesh). He was a member of Pakistan Constituent Assembly. He moved an amendment on February 23, 1948 in the Assembly to include Bengali—the mother tongue of the Bengali people of East Pakistan as one of official languages of Pakistan at par with Urdu and English. The amendment was strongly opposed by Liaquat Ali Khan, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan and Kwaja Nazimuddin, the then Prime Minister of East Pakistan and the amendment was defeated. The lamp of Bengali language movement was first hit then in Pakistan. Bengali-speaking people of East Pakistan formed 60% of the whole population of Pakistan.

On February 21, 1952, the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly (then sitting in the Dacca Hall of Dacca University) was to discuss the state language issue. The students of Dacca University decided to stage a stay-in strike in front of the Assembly Hall in order to prevent the members to enter the Hall. Dhiren Dutta and his friend were also prevented to enter. When he introduced himself, the students let him to enter. The real story started there. The hero was Dhirendranath Dutta. It was he who ignited the flame. The flame ultimately turned into fire.

Language movements all over the world have a chequered history. Language is the life of a nation, the core of its culture and an essential element of its very existence with self-respect.

PEEP INTO THE PAST

February 21, 1952 and May 19, 1961 are the two historic dates in the history of language movement all over the world.

On February 21, 1952 four students of Dacca University—Abdus Salam, Rafiquddin Ahmed, Abdul Barkat and Abdul Jabbar died as a result of police firing in Dacca Medical College Campus, while demonstrating. After more years of intense struggle, the then Pakistan government relented in 1967 and granted official status to the Bengali language. The matter

did not end there. The language movement catalysed the Bengali national identity in Pakistan. This culminated in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 and the eventual birth of the People's Republic of Bangladesh as a sovereign independent country. It proved that religion only cannot define a nation. Thus the Bengali language movement, with its landmark on February 21, 1952, had a long history, creating a new nation with its own language—religion as the basis of a nation slipped into oblivion.

On May 19, 1961, eleven Bengalees including a woman (Kumari Kamala Bhattacharyya—the only woman martyr (Shahid) in the language movement anywhere in the world)—who were all volunteers of Gana Sangram Parishad formed by the Bengalees of the Barak Valley in Assam (Cachar, Karimganj, Haila Kandi and so on) laid down their lives while offering a peaceful 'Satyagraha' at Silchar railway station. The names of the other martyrs are : Tarini Debnath, Chandi Charan Sutradhar, Sukamal Purakayastha, Kumud Das, Kanai Lal Neogi, Sachin Pal, Sunil Sarkar, Hitesh Biswas, Birendra Sutradhar and Satyen Deb. They were recording their protest against the "Assamese only" language policy of the Assam government. In Assam Bengalees are 30% of the population, 30% Assamese, while Garo, Khasi and other tribes (who had their own language) made up the rest. After the firing, the Assam government relented to some extent and declared Bengali as the Second State Language for the Bengali residents. Even during the British rule, there was a heated debate on October 5, 1937 for Bengali language in the Assam Provincial Assembly.

Reorganisation of states in Federal India was also partly based on language. On October 1, 1953 Andhra state was created out of the Telegu-speaking areas of the Madras Presidency—Ramalu was the martyr. During British Colonial rule Sindhi-speaking areas were taken out of Bombay Presidency to create the province of Sindh. The states of Punjab and Haryana were created in recent times—Darsan Singh Ferumon laid his life for the cause. Bengal-Bihar merger plan in 1955-1956 generated another language movement. The States of Kerala, Karnataka and Gujarat were created on the basis of Malayalam, Kanari and Gujrati languages respectively. Madhya Pradesh and Berar was broken to form the state of Madhya Pradesh and Marathi-speaking Nagpur went to the then Bombay province, now Maharashtra. Purulia of Manbhum district was joined to West Bengal due to a movement of April 6-7, 1951. Bengalees of Jharkhand state are still fighting for the inclusion of their mother tongue as one of the official languages.

In 30's of the last century, people revolted in Indo-China (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Anam) against the imposition of French language by its colonial master—France. Later France recognised the mother tongue of the natives of Vietnam as one of the official languages along with French. Indo-China was a French colony from 1858/84 to 1940. It was occupied by Japan during 1940-45 (Second World War). The story of Vietnam War is well known.

People of Latin America fought against the imposition of European languages by their European occupiers. It saw the seeds of national liberation wars there later.

In the United States of America, the Red Indians laid their lives in the thousands for their own language. The same thing happened in the continent of Africa. □□□