

Aspects of Women's participation in the Language Movements of Barak Valley (1961 – 1986)

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Barak Valley is a region in Assam located on the southern part of the state on the banks of river Barak. The region specifically comprises of the three districts of Assam – Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi covering an area of 6962sq. kilometer surrounded by North Cachar Hills on the North, Mizoram and Tripura on the South, and Manipur on the east.¹ On the western side, it is bordered by Sylhet district of present Bangladesh², which had been a part of Assam during the colonial period from 1874 to 1947. The British administrative policies in Assam after establishment of the Company rule in 1826 can be held at the roots of genesis of language problem in Assam. The state of Assam was administered as a part of Bengal from 1826 to 1873³ and in 1874 when it was organized as a Chief Commissioner's province, two Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar were carved out of the Bengal presidency and incorporated into Assam. The twin district of Sylhet and Cachar which formed a part of Assam from 1874 onwards were jointly identified as the Surma Valley Division of Assam in British Official records⁴ Thus, Barak Valley is an extension of Bengal not only in geographic sense but also in socio – cultural and linguistic sense. The creation of Surma Valley division in Assam consisting of Bengali speaking districts of Cachar and Sylhet added to the predominant fears and insecurities of the Assamese. During the period when Assam was administered as a part of Bengal, Bengali was made the official language of Assam in 1836⁵, replacing Assamese which had hitherto been the court language of Ahoms. As a consequence, a notion of identity crisis was gradually instilled in the minds of the Assamese. Though, initially the Assamese intelligentsia seemed to have embraced Bengali as evident from their compositions in Bengali but when the potential threat of linguistic domination was aided with possible economic dominance of the Bengalees with all important administrative posts slipping into the hands of Bengali educated youths, there was a stirring of emotional upheaval amongst the Assamese community against Bengali language and the Bengalees, whom they considered chief obstruction on the path of collective Assamese

interests, which led them into agitation against the language policy of the company administration in Assam. Although, with the help of Christian Baptist Missionary, the Assamese intelligentsia succeeded in convincing the British authority to revise its language policy and Assamese was adopted as the official language and medium of instruction in 1873⁶ but the language issue could not be solved on account of renewed threat from the Bengali Population of newly created Surma Valley division within Assam. The continuation of Bengali as a medium of instruction in primary and middle grade schools after 1874 cemented Assamese suspicion about the motive of the British government to again replace Assamese with Bengali.⁷ Convinced by a belief that Bengali was made the official language of Assam in 1836 based on the assumption that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali, the Assamese intelligentsia attempted at instilling similar assumption in the minds of British authorities but this time, in their favour – that is, by making them believe that regional Bengali spoken in Cachar – Sylhet district was a dialect of Assamese⁸. ‘Notes on Sylhet District’, published by Benudhor Rajkhoya serves as an evidence of such attempt by the Assamese intelligentsia.⁹ The antagonistic feeling among the Assamese against the Bengalees which had been shimmering since colonial period found manifestation in the post independence period. From the statement published in Assam Tribune suggesting the transfer of Cachar district, at least its Hailakadi sub – division, and also the four Bengali speaking thanas of Dhubri subdivision to Pakistan¹⁰ after transfer of Sylhet through Sylhet referendum; the aspiration of the Assamese to constitute a unilingual state can be easily gauged. It was this aspiration of the Assamese community which led the Assamese political leadership to enact the Official Language Bill in 1960 to make Assamese the one and only state official language; the Gauhati University to issue a circular in 1972 declaring the adoption of Assamese as the only medium of instruction in state colleges’ and the Board of Secondary Education of Assam to issue a circular in 1986 which sought to struck down Bengali as one of the medium of instruction in state schools; all aimed at the imposition of Assamese over the non Assamese inhabitants of Assam, particularly the Bengalees of Cachar district. The attempts of the Assamese to fulfill their age old linguistic aspiration were protested by the Bengali community of Barak Valley each time leading to the emergence of a series of language movements in Barak Valley from 1961 to 1986.

The Historical events which define the period from 1961 to 1986 in Barak Valley are the series of language movements led by its Bengali speaking inhabitants to defend their mother tongue. While the Assamese leadership of Brahmaputra Valley aspired for the

Assamisation of the state and made untiring efforts in that regard especially after the exclusion of Sylhet from Assam which gave renewed strength to their linguistic aspirations by marked increase in numerical strength of Assamese speakers in the state from 31.4% in 1931 to 56.7% in 1951 against that of 16.5% Bengali speakers according to 1951 Census¹¹ The Bengalees of Barak Valley, on the other hand resolved to preserve their unique socio-cultural and linguistic identity. As mentioned at the outset, when the Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar were severed out of Bengal and incorporated into Assam, instead of assimilating into the culture of the new land, the region, though a geo-political part of Assam, rather acted as an extension of Bengal in Assam. The Bengalees of Barak Valley preferred to feel themselves culturally a part of Bengal and this attitude of the Bengali intelligentsia was clearly visible when leaders of the Surma Valley Division started a movement for the unification of Sylhet with that of Bengal under the leadership of Kamini kumar Chanda of Cachar in 1918.¹² Thus, it was natural for the Bengalees to protest against the imposition of Assamese over the Valley which had retained its own socio cultural and linguistic identity within the state of Assam. The struggle to defend the identity of the Bengali community, stemming out of its language was a mass struggle. The socio – political struggle to defend linguistic identity of the inhabitants of Barak Valley was joined by mass women constituting integral part of the society.

The study on women's participation in any popular movement requires a prerequisite knowledge of the social setting to which the women participants belonged and the socio political background of the event as well as region of its occurrence in order to understand the process through which women developed political consciousness that made them responsive to social and political changes around them. It is well known that the development of consciousness begins with education and thus the beginning of women's education in Barak Valley can be held at the roots of arousing socio political consciousness among women of the region. The penetration of women's education in Barak Valley from 1860s onwards through the establishment of primary schools for girls in Malugram, Premtala, Shillongpatty and other parts of the Valley by Christian Missionaries gradually brought about significant changes in the mindset of women which paved way for the politicization of women in Barak Valley¹³. The women of Barak Valley with their increasing knowledge of the happenings taking place outside the valley were gradually encouraged to step out of their private domains and register their presence in the public domain. The first contact of the Barak Valley women with nationalist sentiment took place with the arrival of Bipin Chandra Pal in the wake of the

Swadeshi movement, whose speech had such a remarkable influence over the forty women who listened to him from behind the pardah, that immediately after the speech they burnt all the foreign goods under their possession on the street¹⁴. However, it was the arrival of Gandhiji in Fatak Bazar of Silchar in 1921 which transformed the limited political consciousness into active mass participation by women of Barak Valley in the nationalist movements¹⁵. It was this changing socio political scenario along with the spread of women's education in the Barak Valley which had set in motion since pre-independence era that went a long way in encouraging women to come out and participate in the Language Movements which broke out in Barak Valley in the years 1961, 1972 and 1986 in order to essentially contribute towards the defense of their mother tongue.

As mentioned at the outset, immediately after independence the Assam Government declared its intention, in a clear tone, regarding its Language Policy that only Assamese could be the State official Language. In fact, in 1947, Gopinath Bordoloi, the then Chief Minister of Assam declared "It is not the intention of the government to make Assam a bilingual state and for the sake of homogeneity of province... all non-Assamese to adopt Assamese language"¹⁶. This statement generated wave of resentment in Barak Valley where Bengalis formed majority constituting 77% of the total population of the region¹⁷. In 1960, a proposal was raised at the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee to declare Assamese as the one and only official language of the state which was passed in the Assam Legislative assembly by 24th October in the same year¹⁸. This was followed by two more circulars by Gauhati University and Board of Secondary Education of Assam respectively, each aimed at making Assamese the medium of instruction in state colleges and schools. The protest movements which followed in Barak Valley was actively participated by women of the region along with their male counterparts.

The analysis of women's participation in the language movements, however, must begin with mentioning the role played by some of the important women participants before probing into the various aspects of such participation. To begin with the language movement of 1961, the name of Kamala Bhattacharjee, the only woman martyr among 11 language martyrs of the language movement of 1961, outstands all. Kamala Bhattacharjee is known to have embraced martyrdom by bullet shot on her forehead on 19th May, at Silchar Railway station where the Assam police open fired upon the gathering of agitators who had assembled to demonstrate peacefully against the Assam Official Language Act of 1960. Apart from Kamala Bhattacharjee, other women participants included Mangala Bhattacharjee, sister of the

woman martyr; Asharani Dutta, Kamala Rani Das, Kiranbala Dutta, Shibani Biswas, Bharati Chakraborty, Jyotsna Chakraborty; to name a few.¹⁹ Similarly, the language movements of 1972 and 1986 was also participated by women along with men, though these movements did not cost martyrdom of any woman unlike that of the movement of 1961. The women participants of the language movements of 1972 were mostly either school or college student, among whom, mention may be made of Lucky Choudhary and Aparna Bhattacharjee who were arrested for their involvement in 1972 agitations against the circular issued by Gauhati University to make Assamese the medium of instruction in state colleges.²⁰ Regarding the women participants of language movement of 1986, one name which is well known is that of Lopa Mudra Choudhury, who was a school teacher in Karimganj at that time. 'On 21st July 1986, she stood valiantly in front of a police personal who was about to open fire over the crowd of protestors which had assembled to demonstrate against the circular issued by the Board of Secondary Education of Assam. Moreover, the badly injured Satyagrahis were also taken to nearby hospitals by her. This incident was reported by almost all the contemporary newspapers as well some magazines and weekly newspapers of west Bengal, which compared Lopa Mudra Choudhury with Goddess Durga for her courage through their writings.'²¹

The participation of women in the language movements of Barak Valley should however not be confined with mere head-counting or 'ticking off' the names of the women language participants, rather such participation needs to be analysed in a broader perspective. There exists wider range of connotations regarding the participation of women in the activities concerning public domain, especially their participation in the mass movements. 'Women particularly in India are often sum and product of diverse relationship within the family and kinship nexus. How exactly political consciousness or activity grew out of, or grew in reaction to this context is a matter of interesting study'²² There is undoubtedly no denying the fact that, in a gender biased society, where women have traditionally been expected to act in a certain way that befits the so-called 'feminine attributes' and the socially constructed stereotypical 'women's nature', participation of women in such protest movements with a brave spirit of defending the mother tongue, at the cost of anything, hence breaking through the traditionally perceived image of women as being the 'weaker sex' necessitates the need to study the social conditions prevailing in the region which allowed such mass participation by womenfolk of the region. Though women of Barak Valley had been politically active since the period of nationalist struggle particularly since the arrival of Gandhi in Silchar and there

existed a number of women's organisations in Barak Valley such as 'Nari Mangal Samiti' and 'Arya Nari Sangha' at Silchar; 'Mahila Sangha' at Karimganj and Mahila Samiti at Hailakandi by the 20th century²³ but the half liberal character of the society during those days cannot be overlooked in this context which might have acted as restraint on women's active participation and involvement in a mass scale popular struggle. The fact that, despite of the conditions prevailing at the time period of its occurrence these movements were participated by a sufficiently good number of women, indicates that the Gandhian principle of non violent Satyagraha which was adopted by the language 'satyagrahis' during the protest movements might have made the participation of women possible at such scale. The Gandhian philosophy which had hitherto acted as a source of self confidence in women of Barak Valley drawing their mass level participation during Non Cooperation movement²⁴, once again acted as a driving force for mass mobilisation of womenfolk of the Valley.

An interesting point to be raised in this context is how significant was women's participation and what was the actual meaning of their participation. To understand the 'meaning' of women's participation, a set of questions must be asked in the context of women's participation in the language Movements of Barak Valley such as:

- 1) What perception, the male participants had about the role of women participants in such movements?
- 2) What was the nature of such participation?
- 3) Whether women participants acted under any male supervisor or women, themselves assumed leadership?
- 4) How different was women's participation from that of men's and what must be the cause of such differentiation?

Regarding the perception that the male participants had about the women participants, it is evident from the interview of Jyotsna Chakraborty, a woman participant who had joined the demonstration organised at Silchar Railway Station on 19th May 1961, to Barak Bulletin on May 20, 2018; that rather than restricting the role of women as passive coordinators in accordance to the patriarchal mindset of the period, the significance of their active participation was acknowledged by their male counterparts. Speaking to Barak Bulletin, Jyotsna Chakraborty shared her memory of the 19th May incident and mentioned that while she along with other woman participants were lying on the railway tracks with their heads on

the railway lines, they were provided with water by the male participants. Though a little information, but this not only indicates the significance of their active participation but also throws light on the encouragement received from their male counterparts. Moreover, in almost every act of picketing and rallies demanding the status of second official state language for Bengali, women were kept in the front lines probably because it was felt that in the absence of female police personals in those days, presence of women in the front would avoid the occurrences of violence in the fear of infringing on the dignity of women by male police personals.²⁵ Thus, the importance of women's participation was well understood and encouraged. Moreover, in the absence of special jails for women during those days, women participants had to be released even after their arrest which permitted them to carry on the protest using peaceful methods of picketing, hartals and demonstration when the male satyagrahis were put behind the bars²⁶. Thus huge numbers of women were drawn into the movements not only to increase the numerical strength in order to create vision of a huge crowd of protestors but also because the importance of their active participation was well realised.

The participation of women in the language movements was spontaneous and they participated with equal zeal as men. When, on 19th May 1961, police turned brutal and begin lathi charging the Satyagrahis to drive them away from the railway tracks, none of the female participants moved from their position which shows their determined nature of protest.²⁷ Evidently, the women participants fought with 'do or die' spirit, the example of which is the woman language martyr – Kamala Bhattacharjee. Other than Kamala Bhattacharjee, there exist examples of many women who showed equal determination and courage during the course of the movement. From the report submitted by the non official enquiry commission set up after the incident of 19th May 1961, it is evident that, despite of being brutally beaten up by the police, women didn't surrender before the administration.²⁸ The courage shown by women participants is a noteworthy feature of the Language movements of Barak Valley particularly in respect to the time period during which these were held. For instance, on June 7, 1961 student activists including Gopa Dutta, Mondira Roy, Aroti Chakraborty and Minoti Chakraborty, despite of being aware of the possible consequence of their act, forcefully entered Silchar Court and occupied chairs of the District Magistrate and his officials as a reaction to the police open firing over peaceful satyagrahis leading to eleven deaths, for which they were put behind the bars. Similarly, the arrest of women participants of the 1972 language movement such as Lucky Choudhary and Aparna Bhattacharjee could not deter

them from following the path of agitation. As far as the 1986 language movement is concerned, Lopa Mudra Choudhury's act of standing valiantly at police gun point, as mentioned earlier speaks much about the nature of women's participation in the language movements of Barak Valley. While these explain the direct, active and spontaneous nature of women's participation, there were many other women who registered their indirect contribution to the language movements. For example, Geeta Das of Patharkandi, on her husband's objection, though could not participate directly, but contributed indirectly by providing food to the Satyagrahis, hiding her identity²⁹ Thus, the nature of women's participation was a mix of active – passive and direct – indirect participation.

As far as the question of leadership is concerned, in order to analyse, whether women participants assumed leadership or acted under any male supervisor, it has to be first identified that there was no single leadership involved in the movement, rather it involved collective leadership. The mass agitations were not organized by single individual, in fact, all the strategies and lines of protest were determined through discussions in public meetings, under the supervision of some eminent leaders. The role of student unions in organizing the public demonstrations, meetings, picketing programs and rallies is also remarkable. Though, the leadership was to a great extent, collective responsibility but there must have been some of the prominent figures who played vital role in guiding the course and lines of the movements. While, on one hand there were male personalities such as Nolinikanto Das, Rathendranath Sen, Rarendra Mohan Das, Bidhubushan Choudhary, Tarapodo Bhattacharjee and others who played a vital role in guiding language movements towards the right way, on the other hand women such as Shibani Biswas, Gopa Dutta, Lopa Mudra Choudhury and others lacked neither confidence nor leadership quality. But Women leadership was confined to grass root level organisations and women participants were rarely involved in the central decision making bodies³⁰ However, it does not imply a complete absence of women's leadership. For example Shibani Biswas who was elected as the president of a Student Union in 1961 assumed leadership of the rallies and picketing programmes organised by that student organisation³¹ Apart from the language movement of 1961, leadership was assumed by women during the language movements of 1972 and 1986. Although, confined to grass root level but their leadership was quite significant, as the task of mobilisation of the common mass, particularly women depends on the efficiency of the grass root level leaders who are in direct contact with the mass. As far as the near absence of women leaders at top level is

concerned it was probably due to the patriarchal mindset of society as well as because of majority women participants being students.

The discussion so far emphasised on the equal contribution of men and women towards the language Movements of Barak Valley but there exists few evidences which indicate towards certain kind of differentiation between men and women's participation. For instance, the non official enquiry report on the incident of 19th May, 1961 stands evidence to the level of differentiation made by police in the kind of atrocities between the male and the female Satyagrahis during the 'dusk to dawn' Satyagraha organised in Silchar Railway Station on 19th May 1961. While both men and women Satyagrahis were subject to brutal atrocities at the hands of the police but in few cases, atrocity and torture upon women satyagrahis assumed the form of molestation. The example of Kamala Rani Das and Shefali Chakraborty can be cited in this context. They were not only brutally beaten up but were also publically stripped by the police.³² But on the other hand, no such incident was reported to happen with the male participants, which indicates towards the probable differentiation in perception of the women Satyagrahis by the police. The stripping of clothes, only of women participants by the police was most probably an attempt to violate the women's dignity and defame their image in society. It may have been also, an attempt on the part of the police to take pride of their "narrow masculinity" by indicating masculine dominance over female body through this act. However, no such incident of women being ex-communicated by the society and their families after the tortures and harassments faced by them at the hands of the police have been reported in the non official enquiry report.

The analysis of social composition of women participants in the language movements of Barak Valley brings out the fact that these movements were participated by mass women from all castes and occupational groups. An interesting aspect of women's participation in the language movements of Barak valley was that contrary to the traditionally prevalent tendency among Indian Societies to keep women, particularly those belonging to high castes, aloof of any kind of protest movements concerning public domain; language movements in Barak Valley was participated by high caste women in huge numbers. In fact, the woman language martyr belonged to Brahmin caste. In addition to high caste women many women belonging to lower caste groups registered their equal participation. In this context, the active participation of Khyum Nessa³³, belonging to marginalised Muslim community, in the language movement of 1961 is a striking aspect of the movement especially in view of its period of occurrence. Moreover, the women from all occupational groups including that of

students, teachers as well as housewives wholeheartedly participated in the Language movements of Barak Valley, though majority of women participants were students particularly during the language movements of 1972 and 1986.

Conclusion

The narrative aimed at highlighting various aspects relating to women's participation in language movements of Barak Valley from 1961 to 1986 thus makes it clear that women of Barak Valley not only participated in the language movements as passive coordinators but as active protestors and with their individual efforts made equal contribution as that of men towards the success of these movements. Moreover, a special emphasis on the meaning of women's participation makes it clear that there exists many connotations relating to women's participation in such socio – political movements and that women's participation in any movement needs to be looked at with a broader perspective.

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