

Santhali bodies file petition against state

Our Legal Correspondent

KOLKATA, July 22 — The Santhali Literacy and Cultural Society, All India Santhali Welfare and Cultural Society and five others had filed a writ petition challenging the state government's decision introducing "Ol Chiki" script for teaching Santhali language in government institutions.

Appearing for the petitioners, Mr Sukumar Ghosh and Mr Tapas Kumar Chakravarty argued that during the British regime Roman script was

used for teaching Santhali language. There were 1.7 million Santhals in the state. They feared that if Ol Chiki was used the Santhal community of the state would be alienated from the Santhals living in other states.

Appearing for the state Mr Debasish Kargupta, additional government pleader and Mr Somnath De submitted that the NGOs had made a representation to the chief minister. After that the government informed them that it was a policy decision of the government based on the rec-

ommendation of a commission headed by Dr Pabitra Sarkar.

The commission had recommended that Ol Chiki should be used for publication of text books in the Santhali language for government educational institutions. The government did not prevent the use of the Roman script in other organisations.

The Division Bench of Chief Justice Mr VS Sirpurkar and Mr Justice Asok Ganguly was not inclined to interfere in the matter. No order was passed.

বিনা স্বদেশি ভাষা

অষ্টাদশ শতাব্দীর মণিপুরে ভাষাচর্চার ক্ষেত্রে একটি অস্বাভাবিক পরিস্থিতির সূচনা হইয়াছিল। একবিংশ শতকের মণিপুর সেই ভ্রান্তিটি শুধরাইয়া স্বাভাবিক ভাষা-সরণিতে ফিরিয়াছে। অষ্টাদশ শতকে এক মণিপুরি নৃপতি তাঁহার গুরুর প্রভাবে রাজ্যে ঐতিহাসিক মিতেই লিপি বর্জন করিয়া বঙ্গীয় লিপি প্রবর্তন করিয়াছিলেন। তৎপরে তিন শতককাল সেই লিপিই মণিপুরে সংখ্যাগুরু মিতেই জনগোষ্ঠীর লিপি হিসাবে প্রচলিত ছিল। গত শতকে বাংলা লিপিকে সরাইবার সিদ্ধান্ত খাতায়-কলমে গৃহীত হইলেও তাহার বাস্তবায়নের উদ্দেশ্যে কোনও তাৎপর্যপূর্ণ ব্যবস্থা গৃহীত হয় নাই। সম্প্রতি ক্রমবর্ধমান আন্দোলনের পরিণামে মণিপুর সরকার বাংলা লিপিকে বিদায় দিয়া মিতেই লিপি ফিরাইবার সিদ্ধান্তের বাস্তবায়নের কথা ঘোষণা করিয়াছেন। উল্লিখিত প্রথম কর্মটি নিঃসন্দেহে ‘অস্বাভাবিক’। কোনও রাজ্যের সংখ্যাগুরু অ-বঙ্গীয় জনগোষ্ঠী যদি বাংলা পঠনপাঠনের সহিত যুক্ত না থাকেন, তাহা হইলে সেই জনতার উপর রাজ্যেয়ালে সহসা বাংলা লিপি আরোপ করা স্পষ্টতই অন্যায়। রাজতন্ত্র কাটিয়া যখন গণতন্ত্র প্রতিষ্ঠিত হইয়াছে, তখন রাজার বিচিত্র খেয়ালই বা এখনও বহাল থাকিবে কেন? মণিপুরে মিতেই লিপি ফিরাইয়া রাজ্য সরকার সংখ্যাগুরু জনগোষ্ঠীকে লিপি-সংক্রান্ত জটিলতা হইতেই মুক্তি দিল বলা চলে। সুতরাং, এই ঘটনায় বাংলা ভাষা সংক্রান্ত আবেগ-অনুভবে কোনও ভাবেই আঘাত পড়িবার যুক্তি নাই।

শুধুমাত্র ভাষার অধিকারের দাবিতে সম্পূর্ণ একটি জাতি-রাষ্ট্রের গঠন হইল, বিশ্বে এমন সুদুর্লভ কাণ্ড বাংলা ভাষার ক্ষেত্রেই ঘটিয়াছে। তাই, বঙ্গভাষীগণ নিশ্চিত ভাবেই আরোপিত ভাষা বা লিপি এবং সেই সূত্রে কোনও জনগোষ্ঠীর স্বীয় ভাষা বা লিপির সহিত অঙ্গঙ্গী ভাবে যুক্ত আবেগের বিষয়টি বুঝিবেন। মণিপুরে মিতেই জনগোষ্ঠীর ভাষা-সংক্রান্ত আবেগ এবং আন্দোলন তাই নিজভূমে স্বাধিকার প্রতিষ্ঠার প্রয়াস ভিন্ন আর কিছু নহে। বাংলা ভাষা বা লিপির পশ্চাদপসরণ হিসাবে এই ঘটনাকে যেন দেখানো না হয়, সেই ব্যাপারে যত্নবান থাকাই কাম্য। বরং বাংলা লিপির বিষয়টি যখন নূতন করিয়া হঠাৎই আলোচনার বৃত্তে আসিয়া পড়িয়াছে, তখন সেই অবসরে বঙ্গীয় বিদ্বৎবর্গ তথা ভাবুকজন বঙ্গলিপির সংস্কারের বিষয়টি পুনরায় ভাবিয়া দেখিতে পারেন। নির্মোহ দৃষ্টিপাতে দেখিলে প্রশ্ন তুলিতে হয়, বঙ্গলিপি কি দৃশ্যতও খুব সুন্দর? উপরন্তু, প্রায়োগিক ক্ষেত্রে, অর্থাৎ লিখন ও মুদ্রণের ব্যাপারেও এই লিপি লইয়া সমস্যা বিস্তর। উর্ধ্ব হইতে অধঃ, এই ক্রম-উচ্চতায় ভাবিলে তিনটি অংশে বিভক্ত এই লিপির শিক্ষণও বহুতর সমস্যার সৃষ্টি করিয়া থাকে। নবীন শিক্ষার্থী বঙ্গভাষা শিখিবার কালে লিপি লইয়া চিন্তাক্রান্ত, এমন দৃশ্য ঘরে ঘরেই দেখা যায়। অন্তত এই একটি ক্ষেত্রে গোপালের সহিত রাখালের কোনও ভেদ নাই, ‘হেঁড়া ছাতা’ ও ‘রাজছত্র’ একাকার। বঙ্গীয় বিদ্বৎসমাজ যদি সেই লিপির ভোল বদলাইয়া তাহাকে তুলনায় সহজতর এবং ইংরাজি লঞ্জে যাহাকে বলা হয় ‘ইউজার-ফ্রেন্ডলি’, তেমন করিয়া তুলিতে পারেন, তাহাতেই বঙ্গভাষার লাভ হইবে। বঙ্গভাষীগণও লাভবান হইবেন। বাংলা লিপি যদি সত্যিই সহজতর পাঠে দেখা দেয়, তাহা হইলে এই বিশ্বায়নের কালে তাহার প্রসার আরও বাড়িবে নিশ্চিত। বঙ্গলিপির সেই দিগ্বিজয়ের শুভ সূচনা হউক। অন্তত এই বিষয়ে নিরাবেগ, সুস্থ বিতর্ক কাম্য।

19 MAY 2005

ANADABAZAR PATRIKA

Bengali to die slow in Manipur

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Imphal, May 16: The sentence has been declared but death will be slow for the Bengali script in Manipur.

Experts predict that it will take at least a quarter century to put a complete end to the tradition of nearly three centuries of writing Manipuri in Bengali script because of the huge task involved.

On Saturday night, the Okram Ibobi Singh government decided to replace Bengali with the Meitei Mayek script after a violent agitation that saw the state's central library being burnt down.

"Since Meitei will be intro-

duced in the next academic session only in the lower classes, by the time the entire process is complete, it will take not less than a quarter of a century (to complete the transition)," said an educationist, requesting anonymity.

The decision has been generally welcomed in Manipur, even by the hills people, whose leaders had initially opposed the change.

As a compromise, the government has decided that the hills people will use the Roman script.

Meitei Mayek is the script of the Meitei community, who form over 50 per cent of

Manipur's population.

It was abandoned under duress in the 18th century when King Pamheiba under the influence of the travelling Bengali Vaishnavite, Santidas Gossain, burnt all scriptures and other books in that script.

John Pulamte, the president of the All-Tribal Students' Union, said: "We welcome the cabinet decision and particularly the resolution to allow use of Roman script by non-Meitei communities. We also welcome the idea of replacing the Bengali script."

The only demand the hills people have made is that the

government promote tribal dialects.

The United Democratic Front ministry of Youngmasho Seiza, a Naga, passed a resolution in the Assembly in 1980 to make the switch.

Two years ago, the government allowed voluntary organisations to teach Meitei in schools in Classes I and II. The experiment met with little success as learning the script was not compulsory.

At the request of language activists, vernacular newspapers have started writing at least one news report in Meitei.

But the newspaper industry will be among those fields

where Bengali will die the slowest.

"People will have to first learn the script so that they can read a newspaper," added T. Gautam, bureau chief of *Naharolgi Thoudang*, a leading vernacular paper.

The Bengali script was introduced in educational institutions after the British conquered Manipur in 1891.

"Bengali is virtually in the blood" of Manipuris, said the educationist.

Like him, Irengbam Arun, consulting editor of *Eretbok*, another vernacular daily, believes "it will take at least 25 to 30 years" to make the full transition.

Bengali script loses its only outpost

KHELEN THOKCHOM

Imphal, May 15: The Bengali script will die in the only place outside Bangladesh and Bengal where it is used as the medium of writing.

After nearly 300 years, Meitei Mayek, the script of the majority Meitei community in Manipur, will replace Bengali with the cabinet in the northeastern state taking the decision in the wake of three months of agitation.

Meitei Mayek will come back into textbooks from the next academic session, the government of Okram Ibobi Singh decided last night.

Over 270 years ago, Bengali replaced the indigenous script on a decree by the then king Pamheiba (1709-48), who burnt all scriptures and other books written in the Meitei script. Since then, Manipuri has been written in the Bengali script.

The king's action was influenced by Santidas Gossain, a Bengali missionary who came from Sylhet, now in Bangladesh, to spread Vaishnavite culture. Many protested. The protesters were either

WRITING ON THE WALL

- 18th century king Pamheiba banished Meitei and introduced Bengali under his guru's influence
- In 1980, the Manipur Assembly adopts a resolution to reinstate Meitei in textbooks
- Demand continues to simmer but little progress until a flare-up at the start of this year
- On April 13, protesters torch Manipur's central library, demanding Meitei's return
- Eleven days later, they strike again, targeting the railway reservation centre
- An indefinite economic blockade is lifted after the government promises talks
- On May 11, the chief minister meets leaders of the agitation and starts work on settlement

killed or exiled.

This time, too, the chief minister's decision has followed protests and threats from organisations that wanted Meitei to return.

A month ago, demonstrators burnt down Manipur's oldest library in the state capital. Lakhs of Manipuri textbooks written in Bengali were torched.

Last week, a team of leaders of the language movement met Ibobi and gave him seven days to take a decision.

It was not easy for the gov-

ernment to make up its mind as there was strong opposition from other sections of the population to the move, which they saw as imposition of Meitei on them.

To pre-empt another round of agitation from non-Meiteis, the government decided to use the Roman script for Manipuri textbooks for students from these communities, who are tribals living in the hills. Meiteis are plains people who live mostly in the Imphal valley, constituting over 50 per cent of Manipur's population.

Meitei will replace Bengali in classes I and II from the 2006-07 academic session, moving up to higher classes every year till the university level.

The implications of the move are stupendous since new books have to be written in the Meitei script. The cabinet resolved to finish transcription from Bengali to Meitei by October to make books available ahead of the start of the academic session. Schoolteachers will undergo orientation programmes to become familiar with the script.

Still not fully satisfied, the organisation spearheading the agitation has demanded a white paper on the cabinet decision.

"We are yet to get a clear picture of the decision. The government should present a clear picture by Wednesday," it said.

Following an appeal by language activists, all local Manipuri language papers have started using the local script in at least one news item every day.

The Manipur Assembly passed a resolution in 1980 to replace Bengali but no action had been taken until now.

Script typhoon engulfs Manipur

By Pradip Phanjoubam

The violent agitation by the MEELAL (Meiteis Erol Eyek Loinshillon Apunba Lup, or the United Forum for Safeguarding Manipuri Script and Language) in the valley districts of Manipur exposed among other things, the law and order vacuum in the state.

The burning of the Manipur State Central Library which destroyed more than 1,45,000 books on 13 April, 2005, is eloquent testimony to this. In the run up to this atrocious event, MEELAL activists have also

been snatching Manipuri textbooks in Bengali script and making bonfires of them.

All the while, the Okram Ibobi Singh-led Congress government has been merely "waiting and watching" in the hope that the storm would eventually spend itself. But it has refused to subside. MEELAL wants the "immediate" replacement of the Bengali script by the indigenous Meitei Mayek and all school textbooks in the latter script from the current academic session.

Disregarding appeals, MEELAL intensified its campaign and added an eco-



The State Central Library in Imphal, set ablaze by suspected Meitei Mayek activists, is destroyed.

— Eastern Projections

nomie blockade over and above its textbook burning spree. A dozen or so freight trucks that entered Imphal against the blockade call ended up in ashes, in the heart of the capital, in full public view and under the very nose of the government.

At one stage, MEELAL issued a diktat that all vernacular dailies should begin using Meitei Mayek by 1 March. The newspapers initially refused, provoking MEELAL activists to raid newspaper distribution centres and intimidate hawkers.

In protest, newspapers in the state stopped publication for three days until a settlement was negotiated under which MEELAL was to allow the distribution of newspapers if the vernacular newspapers reserved some space on the front page for news written in Meitei Mayek. The government continued its watching game.

All except one daily complied with the agreement, but many were compliant and even used the entire front page for news written in Meitei Mayek.

The government did nothing again when a faction of the Kangleipak Communist Party imposed a five-day bandh on the state, beginning 10 April and concluding on 16 April, in a show of solidarity for MEELAL's demands.

The party has now issued a death threat to legislators and senior executives of the education department.

MEELAL, too, has threatened it would begin sabotaging essential services. The burning of the Central Library stirred the government a little and two Additional Directors-General of Police were penalised for negligence. Not long after them, two Superintendents of Police of Imphal West and East districts, too, have been shunted out.

MEELAL's passion is akin to a fundamentalist thirst for revenge on history. Their act of torching books written in Bengali is, by their own admission, symbolic reprisal for the burning of ancient Meitei Mayek manuscripts called *Puyas*, in 1726, by King Pamheiba (rechristened Garib Niwaz) after he made Vaishnavism the state religion.

Many of these books, it is said, were occultist in content, enumerating magic rites, oracular predictions and *tantric* medicinal traditions. Others were records of events. There was resistance from those who refused the new religion, and many of the books and scholars went underground or into self-imposed exile.

There is broad agreement among Meitei underground organisations and a majority of Meiteis, that the scripts must be switched, although not many agree with the manner in which the demand is being pressed, violently and with such unreasonable obduracy.

Many creases remain to

be smoothed out in the script, which has not been in use for nearly all of three centuries.

For instance, the officially recognised Meitei Mayek has 27 alphabets, but there is another group of activists and scholars who say it should contain 36. A district court recently ruled the 36-script is the older of the two.

The Manipur Legislative Assembly, on 21 February, shot down by a voice vote majority a private member's resolution for the immediate switch of scripts, although the government gave a commitment for a phase changeover.

A Cabinet meeting again failed to arrive at a tangible decision on the issue, supposedly on account of many technical hurdles.

There are other hurdles, too. The high-pitched climb of Meitei nationalism in making non-Meitei communities in the state uneasy Organisations like the ANSAM, (All Naga Students' Association Manipur) and ATSUM (All Tribal Students' Union Manipur) have openly expressed fears that the script may come to be forced on them.

While a majority of the Meiteis, if not all of them, would not want the Meitei Mayek dead and forgotten, the general reading is that the other communities would not be all too pleased if it was to be made the compulsory written medium in schools and colleges. And why would they not be?

Minus its symbolic value as an identity landmark, which is important for the Meiteis but unlikely to be held as passionately by the others, what advantage would they or for that matter the Meiteis have from the switch in a globalised world?

The words of Ludwig Wittgenstein, rings familiar: "The limits of my language are the limits of my world." Thankfully most Meiteis realise beyond the limits of their language, they have to hitch a ride on other languages with greater reaches.

(The author is editor, *The Imphal Free Press*)

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