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Sudeshna Sinha: A Heroine's Sacrifice for her Mother Tongue and Society

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the life and deeds of the noble lady, Martyr Sudeshna Sinha, who sacrificed her life for the autonomy of her mother tongue. She fought for her community and set an example as a brave lady. This article will explore her life and works and to what extent she went to save her mother tongue and the Bishnupriya Manipuri community. It will explore the Huge Andolan (Movement) in Assam in 1996, in various districts, where several brave comrades began fighting for their respective Mother Tongues. Among them, Sudeshna was also one who was killed by police firing during the protest. She sets an example for women in society and significantly impacts local communities on the lengths to which someone can go to preserve their mother tongue. At last, the article will discuss the profound consequences of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Bhasa Andolan's 501 hours of rail-blocking movement. This significant event brought attention to the plight of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community. Along with that, we will be discussing the other participants who participated in the Andolan. Sudeshna is the one who burned the flame inside the community of Bishnupriya Manipuri. That showed how much language is essential for us. She was a brave martyred and an inspiration for the whole community.

INTRODUCTION:

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The Manipuris were linguistically divided into two ethnic groups, the Meitei and the Bishnupriya. The Meitei Manipuri came to Manipur from the East, which is why Tibeto-Burmese influence is evident. In contrast, the Bishnupriya Manipuri came to Manipur from the West, which is why a slight touch of Indo-Aryan has drastically evolved around them. According to 'Khumal Purana,' a particular group of people who rejected the idea of purification by King Garib Nawaz (1714-1748) who wanted to embrace a new religion by claiming it as a process of purification, but they denied the offer of the king by adopting their religion which was Vaishnavism, and the people needed no more purification. These people were known as Bishnupriya, i.e., Lord Visnu's darlings. (Sinha, K. P. 2017 Page 1,2) There are several related theories. According to some, a particular group of people used to pray to lord Visnu at a place that was ultimately named after him as 'Bishnupur.' That is how the community there is named after that headquarters, 'Bishnupur,' and the people living there are named after the village Bishnupriya, as recorded by G.A. Grierson (Sinha, K. P. 2017 Page 2). With such a rich culture and heritage, the Bishnupriya Manipuri community's language deserves recognition and should not be marginalised. The constant conflicts between the two groups had made terrible situations, resulting in the community fleeing from Manipur to multiple states of the Northeast, such as Assam, Tripura, Cachar, and Sylhet, during the 18th and 19th centuries. When migrating to various places, the language could not get its deserving recognition, so the community started several rallies and protests at different locations to recognise their mother tongue. According to the census report of India in 1961, two communities were divided: the Bishnupriya and the Meitei. However, in the census report 1971, they disagreed with the name or giving any rights, even at the primary level. In contrast, all the other mother tongues got their recognition except the Bishnupriya Manipuri. As a result, the Manipuri Bishnupriya Andolan Parishad started protesting at various places in 1966, which continued up to 1996. A brave girl from the community named Sudeshna Sinha, who belongs to the district of Karimganj, also participated in the protest at the Kalkalighat Railway station in a 501-hour Rail Blocking Movement for the recognition of her mother tongue. A 31-year-old girl, without any fear of death, laid down on the railway track without thinking about her life.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

It has a gigantic culture, rich intellectual achievements, and all the sacrifices made by the Martyr Sudeshna Sinha. However, the language still has a gap in the literary sections, and the homage that the Bishnupriya Manipuri language deserves has not been received. The martyr who inspired several ladies to fight for their rights is slowly disappearing. This injustice and inequality in the recognition of the Bishnupriya Manipuri language need to be addressed urgently.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

The article explores the role of tradespeople as a source of money-making motivation for the ladies of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Communities, specifically in Assam, and the non-creamy layer (economically poor) sections of society. As women in villages face heavy financial crises or must be dependent on their spouses for every small need, the research accentuates how they change their fortune through the forms of art they learn from their ancestorial time, such as handloom and art and craft made by the ladies of Bishnpriya Manipuri communities. The thesis explores how to maximise entrepreneurship among the ladies who face several issues in their day-to-day lives to survive in this world.

The articles describe the emigration of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community from Manipur and its impact on its language, culture, and people. They also examine the community's problems and the ongoing struggle they had to go through to safeguard and fight for their mother tongue, which is still going on as it cannot be recognised. They focus on the differences between the two communities: the Bishnupriyas and the Meitei. It also studies the vigorous policies of King Garib Nawaj and outsiders' incursion. It does not restrict its wings inside Manipur. It also shows that the upliftment of the community is upgraded to other places.

K. P. Sinha's The Bishnupriya Manipuri Language is an exceptional thesis exploring the rich linguistic, heritage, and historical aspects of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Language and community, which spread throughout the Northeast and parts of Bangladesh. He showed the influence of Indo-Aryan on the language and its role in preserving it for future generations. Apart from its linguistic involvement, it also serves the folklore and rituals of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Community. The book is vital to South Asian studies, anthropologists, and linguists. It's one of the most rare and crucial sources of understanding about the cultural heritage of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Community.

The literary work surrounds persistence, dignity, and mental health. It has been highlighted for the growth of the upcoming students of the generation, where gender and society play a vital role. It also shows how students from various backgrounds face difficulties regarding their mental health and cope with mechanisms. It expands the idea of craftsmanship in every aspect of Bishnupriya Manipuri's entrepreneurship skills and how the community ladies helped with socio-economic challenges. It helps in economic factors and plays its role more as a religious and cultural value. The study introduces us to the cultural values that ultimately lead to economic growth in the community of Bishnupriya Manipuri.

Research Gap:

Since Bishnupriya Manipuri is regarded as an endangered Ethnic Community Group, there is a shortage of information and specifics on this community in the literature. Few people are aware of the martyr Sudeshna's efforts, but she sacrificed her life for the community. However, it turned into a little-known period of history that no one discusses or acknowledges her accomplishments. This post will address people's misunderstandings and uncertainties about Bishnupriya Manipuri's language, as well as the lifelong sacrifices made by our independence fighters to preserve their mother tongue.

OBJECTIVES:

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To discuss the ancient and ongoing challenges faced by the Bishnupriya Manipuri community regarding their identity crisis and recognition for formal studies like government Institutions or their separate language, despite the sacrifices made by the martyr Sudeshna.
2. Encourage the future generation to know about their roots and tell them about their ancestors' sacrifices to save their mother tongue, to the extent that they had to choose either their mother tongue or life.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

The research questions of the study are:

1. Why is enthusiasm not seen in youngsters today even though their ancestors gave their lives for the sake of their mother tongue, which they are now slowly forgetting?
2. Why have we seen only one person, Sudeshna, from the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, step forward to contribute to society? Why have not more men/women followed in her footsteps to create a positive impact and continue her legacy?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM:

The research paper will give a deeper understanding of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Community and the lifelong efforts of our martyrs who fought to save their mother tongue. It will also provide more intellectual knowledge about the daily lives of the community's females and their efforts to continue their lives while facing an identity crisis. Lastly, it will discuss Martyr Sudeshna Sinha’s efforts, which are still unknown to many.

METHODOLOGY:

The research utilises a categorical data design focusing mainly on secondary data and interviews. It primarily depends on historical books and relevant documents that give a deeper understanding of the importance of the language and how important it is for future generations to know about it. To strengthen the matter, particular targeted interviews were conducted with the participants of the 1996 Bhasa Andolan, along with a few comrades of Miss Sudeshna Sinha, who also faced severe injuries and issues during the 1996 501-hour Rail Blocking Protest.

RESEARCH DISCUSSION:

The Intricate History of 1996 Bhasa Andolan

The movement for the Language of Bishnupriya Manipuri continued from 1961 to 2001. Here is the list of countless movements

- July 2, 1961(Bhasa Parishad of NBMM chalked out programs and observed this day as The Bhasa Dabi Divas.)
- July 25, 1961 (The matter was communicated to the Govt. of Assam, Education Department)
- March 22, 1963 (Shri D.N Bajpei met with a deputation of the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Sahitya Parishad.)
- July 7, 1964 (Bhasa Parishad submitted a memorandum to the Assam Chief Minister.)
- July 28, 1964 (The Matter was Forwarded for consideration to the Political Department)
- July 2, 1965 (Bhasa Davi Saptaha(Demand week) observed (July 2 -July 8)
- May 23, 1966 (A delegation of the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Bhasa Parishad met Shree K.K Sharma, Secretary, state board of Elementary Education and discussed the necessity of immediate and speedy implementation of BPM language at Assam.) (Sinha, K. P. 1960, Page 4).

But the movement of 1996 took place a particular remark on the history of Bhasa Andolan as the protest was going on in two areas of Assam, one at Hilara Station termed as Pancha Bishnupriya namely Bikrampur, Baromoni, Meherpur, Jatrapur, and Kalain. The continuous trials of several immense protests caught the eye of the government. The only motive of the 501-hour rail-blocking protest was to ask for recognition from the government of the language that carries such Indigenous history with it. The main demands of the protest were:

- Immediate implementation of the introduction of the Bishnupriya Manipuri language as a medium of instruction in the primary stage of education in Assam and Tripura.

- Broadcast of Cultural programs in Bishnupriya Manipuri at the AIR station, Gauhati.
- Financial assistance to the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipur Sahitya Parishad.
- Proper representation in the Central and State Legislatures through Reservation or Nomination.
- Reservation of special Quota in Govt. and Semi-Govt. Services.
- Financial assistance is available to all students of this linguistic minority, irrespective of divisions.
- Correction of Census of 1961 (Sinha, K. P. 1960, Page 3).

The significant protest aimed to save the community's existence, which the government denied. Census according to the census conspiracy 1961-1971, only 1(one) woman from Patharkandi was recorded from the community in place of 22,000 (Twenty-Two Thousand population), and 13 (Thirteen) Males from Tripura were recorded in place of almost 20,000(Twenty Thousand). In the census report 1951, the population of Bishnupriya Manipuri was 0 (Zero). It became a considerable number when G.A. Grierson found out in 1981. The increasing population was not imaginable, nor could it go from zero to thousands. (Sinha, K. P. 1960, Page 2)

So, there was a vast political conspiracy regarding the language that evolved in it (Sinha, K. P. 1960, Page 2). In the early 1990s, The community felt severely marginalised and oppressed due to a lack of identity, termed as Second-Class Manipuris in Assam and other places, as the language was not recognised. Without educational and cultural support, the language is on its way to disappearing. For continuous efforts for years still, there was no such response from the side of government, which fuelled disappointment and fear of language extinction. In response, the community started one of the historic protests in 1996, aiming to get a reaction from the government to recognise their language.

The Blockade of the 501-Hour Rail Hundreds of members of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community assembled at the railway stations in Kalkalighat and Bikrampur on the selected day in 1996. To cause annoyance and pressure authorities to pay attention to their requests, the demonstrators—who included activists, students, and community elders—erected blockades to stop railway services. This blockage was one of the longest rail blockades in the history of protests in India, lasting 501 hours or more than 20 days, but unfortunately, they could not make it successful as the strike lasted hardly 4 days. Their main demands were the formal recognition of the Bishnupriya Manipuri language and the establishment of cultural and educational initiatives to preserve and advance it. The movement's founders emphasised the preservation of language to ensure their people's cultural survival, and their position was forceful but nonviolent.

Sudeshna Sinha became a prominent figurehead and supporter of the Bishnupriya Manipuri cause during this struggle. She was instrumental in bringing the community together and mobilising support for the

language movement despite obstacles and government resistance. Her leadership inspired many because she highlighted the struggles of a small community that were mostly ignored by the political mainstream. Sudeshna Sinha's efforts weren't in vain. The demonstration and the more significant movement were significantly influenced by several other influential individuals and community members, among them Nirmal Sinha, Pramodini Sinha, Ratna Singha Hajari, Tulsidas Singha from Pratapgarh and Golap Singh, Kalachand Singha Tampha Sinha and many other prominent active members participated in the auspicious rail blocking movement (Sinha, B. G. 2020, Page 154). These allies included activists, cultural leaders, and student leaders who supported Sinha. Despite social opposition, physical hardship, and police involvement, their unity remained unwavering. Many young activists, mainly from Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Yuva Parishad and Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Bhasa Parishad and various active committees, diligently worked to raise awareness of the predicament of their language among the general Indian people and mobilise resources. Other regional communities and activists who supported language rights in India backed their efforts. These allies gave the Bishnupriya Manipuri people a feeling of camaraderie and togetherness, which raised their spirits and strengthened their resolve. Many people lost their jobs because the government ruled that protesters were prohibited from working under government organisations. The continuous visit of the Police made the life of protestors challenging to live; they had to hide at several places to save their lives. The older adults from the community came to the front and inspired their children. The 31-year-old girl from the community, the daughter of Suresh Sinha and Urmila Sinha from the village of Kachubari, was shot dead by keeping the national flag on her chest, shouting the slogan ‘Mother Tongue, Long Live!’. The body of the brave martyred was taken to Guwahati Medical College, and a few other candidates were hospitalised along with her (Sinha, B. G. 2020, Page- 125). The Bishnupriya Manipuri community's fight for linguistic recognition underwent a sea change in 1996.

Even though the protest's immediate result was not the language's official recognition, it significantly increased public awareness of the problem. The campaign prepared the government to make small concessions in the following years, such as providing cultural support and introducing Bishnupriya Manipuri language programs at certain educational institutions. From then on, 16th March was a ‘Black Hole Tragedy’ for the community. As a result of the sacrifice, two days after the protest on 18th March 1996, Hiteshwar Saikia, the Chief Minister of Assam, declared formally vide govt. Notification No: TAD/92/94pt-3, Dt.18.03.96, enlisted the Bishnupriya Manipuri community as a Backward Class Community (OBC) under serial 13.

Women were pivotal in this demonstration, organising and mobilising the community and risking their lives for a cause beyond personal gain. Their participation demonstrated the bravery and leadership that women

possess when it comes to protecting their rights and cultural heritage. Motivated by a strong sense of purpose, they persevered in the face of adversity, including the possibility of violence and police action. More women joined the movement due to Sudeshna Sinha's sacrifice, which served as a beacon of tenacity and proved that fighting to preserve culture and language is worthwhile, even at personal expense. Recalling the 1996 rail blockade and Sudeshna Sinha's sacrifice continues to empower women today, inspiring them to embrace their roles as guardians of culture, language, and identity across communities. This movement united the Bishnupriya Manipuri community and inspired women from other communities. For example, the Bishnupriya women stood up for their language, encouraging others to do the same to preserve their cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION:

The moving story of tenacity, selflessness, and intense cultural pride is told via Sudeshna Sinha's trip and the Bishnupriya Manipuri community's commitment to protecting their mother tongue. Her story demonstrates the community's steadfast dedication to its language identity and is set within the broader framework of the 1996 Bhasa Andolan (Language Movement). In addition to fighting for a language, Bishnupriya Manipuri's campaign for formal recognition also fought to preserve a cultural legacy that has influenced generations. The 1996 Bhasa Andolan emerged as a potent symbol of this cause, signifying the community's defiance of social, political, and cultural obstacles. The personal costs and sacrifices made by those who fought for their language are reflected in Sudeshna Sinha's journey. She reminds us of the close relationship between language and identity, as do many other movement members. The work of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community provides hope for underrepresented languages worldwide in a world where linguistic variety is in danger of becoming homogenised. Their tenacity helped Bishnupriya Manipuri gain respect and acceptance over time and served as a model for other language communities dealing with comparable issues. Even though the path was difficult, their accomplishments are a testament to the triumph of perseverance and teamwork over hardship.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. Bishnupriya Manipuri language preservation and promotion efforts should be bolstered. Government agencies, cultural groups, and academic institutions ought to work together to plan seminars, workshops, and other cultural events that showcase the language's distinctive literature, art, and tradition. Younger generations might be inspired to embrace and preserve their heritage by participating in these initiatives.

2. The language of Bishnupriya Manipuri can be preserved for future generations by being included in local school curricula. With the help of textbooks, educational resources, and teacher preparation, schools in areas with a sizable Bishnupriya Manipuri population should offer the language as a topic. Higher education institutions establishing a department dedicated to Bishnupriya Manipuri studies can advance academic research and preservation efforts.

INTERVIEWS

1. Dr. Subhash Sinha aged 51 Son of Lt. Sudanya Sinha, Shantipur, Silchar, Assam. He is the Principal of Swami Vivekananda College, Chandkhira, and an active member of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Community.
2. Nirmal Sinha, aged- 58 Son of Chandmuni Sinha, Kachubari, Patharkandi, Karimganj. He is the Principal of Aryabhatta English School and, along with Sudeshna Sinha, played a vital role during the 1996 protest.
3. Pramodini Sinha, aged 56, is the daughter of Krishnakumar Sinha, who lives in Kachubari, Patharkandi, Karimganj. She is a primary teacher at 401 No Kachubari L.P. School and a social activist who suffered severe injuries during the 1996 protest.
4. Amit Sinha, Age- 40 Son of-Suresh Chandra Sinha Kachubari, Patharkandi, Karimganj. He is a primary school teacher at Chandkhira Noyatilla L.P. School and the brother of martyr Sudeshna Sinha.

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