

# An Analytical Study of Muslim Immigrants in Tripura In The 1<sup>st</sup> Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

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## Abstract:

*Tripura, a small hilly state of Eastern India was an independent princely state before her amalgamation in the Union territory of India on 15th Oct. 1949. She got her recognition as a full-fledged state on 21st January 1972. However, this princely state witnessed a massive flow of immigrants in the 1st half of the 20th century which ultimately changed the demographic pattern of the state. Both the Hindus and Muslims from the adjoining territories of the princely state immigrated due to political and economic push factors but under the systematic administrative guidance of the Manikya rulers, the pull factors also worked behind these huge mass movements. A large number of Hindus as well as Muslims immigrated into the princely state Tripura during the period, but the flow of Muslim immigrants decreased in percentage in the latter part of this period. This article is an attempt to study analytically the Muslim immigrants in the 1st half of the 20th century i.e. from 1901 till the amalgamation of the princely state Tripura with the Indian Union on 15th Oct 1949.*

**Key words:** Migration, Tripura, Manikya ruler, Immigrants, Ziratia peasants

There was always a close socio-economic contact between the colonial Bengal and the Princely state Tripura, and it was possible due to the close geopolitical symmetry with the colonial rulers and with the people of Bengal. The close affinity between the Colonial Bengal and Hill Tipperah instigated the movements of the people from one place to another and the flow of migration, which was started in the last part of the 19th century, continued till the period under review.

Accordingly, Tripura started its journey in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a population of 1,73,325. In the census of 1901, special interest was also given to find out the number of immigrants in Tripura. In the census of 1901 in Tripura, the Bengali people were once again divided into Hindu Bengali and Muslim Bengali. It was said in that census that, the high caste Hindu and Muslim people are few in number. The below tables<sup>1</sup> show the numbers of Hindu Bengali and Muslim Bengali peoples of various castes.

**Table 1. Bengali Hindu according to the Census of 1901**

Caste	Number
Brahmins	678
Baidya	223
Kayasthas	1,704
Sudra	1,003
Barai	690
Teli	677

Kamar	458
Napit	353
Yogi	2,014
Kapali	1,755
Namasudra	3,508
Kaiborta	746
Patni	703
Saha	279
Dhopa	281
Total No.	15,072

**Table 2. Bengali Muslim according to the Census of 1901**

Caste	Number
Kaji	34
Mughal	30
Sayyed	98
Pathan	29
Sheik	44,426
Total	44,617

The above tables depict that the total number of Bengali people living in Tripura in the year 1901 was 59,689. It was enumerated that 43,894 people migrated to Tripura<sup>2</sup> though in the Imperial Gazetteers of India Vol XIII the number of immigrants was 40,000.<sup>3</sup> According to Dr J. B. Ganguli, those migrated people came to Tripura from the neighbouring districts of Bengal.<sup>4</sup> Those immigrants were migrated mostly from the Sylhet district of Assam and from Tipperah, Noakhali and Chittagong and table no 3 makes it clear that most of those migrants are from Sylhet and Tipperah i.e. the main part of them were Bengali migrants.<sup>5</sup>

**Table no 3 Immigrants in Tripura in 1901 census**

Source of Migration	1901
Tipperah	12,055
Noakhali	4,146
Chittagong	6,272
Chittagong Hill Tracts	1,228
Central Provinces and States	160
United Provinces and States	988
Assam * (Sylhet)	16,106
Elsewhere	2939
Total immigrant population	43,894

The number of immigrants of the period constituted approximately 25.38 per cent of the total population. But the sex ratio as per the census report of 1901 depicts the real nature of the immigrants. The below table shows the sex ratio of the immigrants in Tripura, 1901.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 4. Sex Ratio according to the census 1901.**

Class	Male	Female
Bengali Hindu	8,997	6,079
Bengali Muslim	24,300	20,317
Total	33,297	26,396

It is clear from the above table that the female percentage was lower than the male. This fact reveals that the people who migrated from Bengal to Tripura were moved by the easy earning in Tripura. The immigrants left their family members in the colonial Bengal and the officials, government employees, farmers and the working class came to Tripura for employment only, not intending to settle in the State permanently. “The newcomers do not at once entirely leave their residence in British territory, they keep their families and friends there, and make in Hill Tipperah only *Khamar Baris* or farmhouses in which they live for the purposes of carrying on their cultivation.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly W. W. Hunter in the *Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. VI, said, “Among the Bengalis, women are never employed in field labour, but the children occasionally take part in the work of cultivation.”<sup>8</sup>

According to the 1901 Census, Ninety-one per cent of the population depended on agriculture for their livelihood, three per cent only on cottage and village industries and handicrafts and the rest on various services and professions. This maximum dependence on agriculture was due to the fact that in the last twentieth of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the rulers of Tripura, to extend the cultivation and to increase the land revenue encouraged the Bengali cultivators of the neighbouring British districts to immigrate into the State. The *Jangalabadi* system introduced by the rulers of Tripura in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also encouraged the cultivators of the adjoining territories to immigrate into Tripura. According to this system, “The land to be rent-free for a period of from four to ten years, according to the nature of the jungle; then to be subject to rent at the rate of 2 or 3 *annas* per *bigha*, gradually increasing till it reaches a moderate amount, which does not yet equal the rate paid for adjoining lands in Government (British Indian) territory.”<sup>9</sup> According to the Sylhet District Gazetteer of 1905, there are plenty of wastelands still available in Tripura and the administration of the state was enthusiastic to lease it out on easy terms. Hence, the people of the densely populated subdivisions of Sylhet were attracted towards Tripura.<sup>10</sup> It is also stated in the *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers, Noakhali*, that “...there is a steady exodus to Hill Tippera, where land can be had cheap”.<sup>11</sup>

The above table also makes us clear that the Bengali Muslims were much more in number than the Bengali Hindus in Tripura in that period. The reasons may be summed up as follows: The Hill Tripura was surrounded by the districts of Colonial Bengal like Tipperah (Comilla), Noakhali, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Sylhet where the neediest, lower-class Muslim cultivators were available. W. W. Hunter wrote that “The people who practice this form of cultivation (plough cultivation) are, with few exceptions, Bengalis and Manipuri, the majority of the Bengalis being Mohammadans.”<sup>12</sup> According to Thakur Shri Somendra Chandra Devbarma, the Bengali Muslims were hard-working, laborious, expert in plough cultivation and brave enough to enter into the interior of Tripura. Thus, in comparison to the Bengali Hindu cultivators, the Bengali Muslim cultivators migrated into Tripura.<sup>13</sup>

The progressive rulers of Tripura also offered incentives to the Bengali immigrant Muslim cultivators by keeping the rates of rent very low. To increase the revenue for the state and to increase the total production of the agricultural products the Manikya rulers of Tripura encouraged the cultivators to migrate. In an Annual Report, it was stated that “none but the most needy amongst the lowest classes of the people can be induced to immigrate into this country”<sup>14</sup>. J. B. Ganguli said, “Tripura was like an El Dorado to the hordes of land-hungry people, who almost frenzily grabbed easily culturable fertile valley lands almost in a low prices or by paying a nominal ‘*najrana*’ (tribute) to the king”<sup>15</sup>

The Census Report of 1901 depicts that the educated aborigines were only a few in number for the administrative machinery of the state. Hence, it became necessary for the progressive minded rulers of Tripura to invite the educated persons to run the administration efficiently and to make it a modern one. Nevertheless, from the census of 1901, it is also clear that the number of educated Hindus in Tripura were much more in number than the educated Muslims. The below table shows the number of English and

Bengali educated Hindus and Muslims living in Tripura in the year 1901.<sup>16</sup> Hence, it was clear that the Muslim immigrants in Tripura were basically cultivators or labours.

**Table 5. Educated Hindus and Muslims according to the Census 1901.**

	Population	Bengali Educated	English Educated
Hindus	1,19,192	2503	291
Muslims	45,323	990	31
Total	1,64,515	3493	322

Another form of Muslim immigrants, in this period, is the temporary migrants in the form of “Ziratia” peasants. To improve the economic conditions of their state the Manikya rulers of Tripura, gave much more impetus to settled cultivation. As mentioned earlier, for settled cultivation they invited the Bengal cultivators in the State. For settled cultivation, the plains land adjoining to British districts were first taken up for renovation. The cultivators from Colonial Bengal were invited to utilize the plains land of Tripura in lue of rent to be paid to the ruler of Tripura. Those tenants were known a “Ziratia”. The *Ziratia* were subjects of British India but owned land within the independent state of Hill Tipperah.<sup>17</sup> They were a distinctive group of non-resident tenants.

*Ziratia* peasants were the special kind of farmers who used to migrate temporarily into Tripura during the agricultural season. They used to migrate into the State at their own convenience. In the state, they used to construct temporary huts of their own and cultivate certain plots of land and produce crops thereon.<sup>18</sup> When they completed the whole process of harvesting, they used to go back to their own homes in Colonial India. Nevertheless, before they went back to their home, they had to pay rent to the rulers of Tripura in form of “either cash or in-kind” as it was settled at the time of their agreement. “On rare occasions when Tripura faced food shortage the state-imposed restrictions on the *Ziratia* tenants to take out of the state paddy in excess of what was actually needed to meet the consumption requirements of their families.”<sup>19</sup> The *Ziratia* peasants were basically Bengali Muslim of the neighbouring districts<sup>20</sup> of British India, especially from Tipperah, Noakhali and Sylhet. As said by Nagendra Jamatia an ex-MLA of Tripura, “During the period of World War II, there was the scarcity of labour in Tripura and to fulfil the demands of *Zamindari* the people, both Hindus and Muslims, were collected from the borderlands of Chakla Roshnabad on the basis of *Ziratia* system.... The numbers of those *Ziratia* peasants were approximately 80,000.”<sup>21</sup>

Surprisingly, the flow of Bengali Muslim immigrants in Tripura decreased considerably in the period under review. As the numbers of Bengali Muslim in Tripura were much more than the Bengali Hindu in Hill Tipperah according to Atish Chandra Choudhury’s, Census Report 1310 T.E. (1901 A.D.). The below table shows that the number of Bengali Muslims in Tripura decreased at a considerable rate.<sup>22</sup>

**Table no. 6. Number of Bengali Muslims in Tripura (1901-51)**

Census Year	Total population	Muslim Population	Variation in %
1901	1,73,325	45,323	26.15
1911	2,29,613	68,953	43.33
1921	3,04,437	82,288	26.68
1931	3,82,450	1,03,720	26.04
1941	5,13,010	1,23,570	19.14
1951	6,45,707	1,36,981	21.21

The reason behind the decrease of the Muslim population in Tripura was due to the flow of an immense number of Hindu immigrants into Tripura, not only from the adjoining territories of the state but also from the other parts of India. The people from Bengal immigrated much more in number than the other

British states of India and the maximum number of Bengali immigrants were from the district of Tipperah and Sylhet. Though the trends of migration remain the same from the year 1901 to 1931, in the last 20 years of the period under study the flow of Hindu immigrants increased due to the political turmoil and communal disturbances in colonial Bengal. Thousands of people took shelter in the princely state. Tripura began to feel the atrocious impact of communal tension and political turmoil in British India culminating in the partition of India from a much earlier date.<sup>23</sup> The influx of migrants due to political and communal turmoil in Tripura began almost in 1942 when a great communal riot took place in Raipur P.S. in the district of Dacca.<sup>24</sup> Syama Prasad Mookerjee in his diary, dated 6<sup>th</sup> December 1945, mentioned that “Early in April, that is, a fortnight later, a terrible devastation took place in the rural areas in the Narayangunge sub-division. Nearly eighty villages were burnt and looted; about 3000 people fled for their lives to the nation-State of Tippera. Hindus were about fifteen per cent here; Muslims fifty-five per cent. Leaflets were circulated that Hindus if they chose to live must live as converts to Islam. Fresh conversions took place.”<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, due to the communal chaos in response to the ‘Direct Action Day’ in the district of Noakhali and Chandpur, a large number of Hindu migrants came to Tripura in the year 1946 and this was the biggest influx of refugees in Tripura before the partition of India.<sup>26</sup> According to Tripur Chandra Sen, “several thousands of refugees came to Agartala”<sup>27</sup> due to Noakhali riots. However, some of the migrants returned to their homes on the assurance given by Mahatma Gandhi, but most of them did not respond to it and settled in Tripura.<sup>28</sup>

Hence, it was clear that the migration of the Muslims in Tripura was the result of both push and pull factors. The Muslims from the adjoining territories of the princely state immigrated due to economic push factors but under the systematic administrative guidance of the Manikya rulers, the pull factors also worked behind these migrations. In the 40s of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when communal riots started in colonial India especially in Bengal and when India was partitioned in the name of religion the Muslim immigration decreased considerably.

<sup>1</sup> Census Report 1310 T.E. (1901 A.D.), Tribal Research Institute, Government of Tripura, Agartala, Re-printing 1995, pp.21-22.

<sup>2</sup> N De, *A Historical Analysis of Migration in Tripura 1900-1971*, Research India Publications, New Delhi, 2019, p.31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> J.B.Ganguli, *The Benign Hills*, Tripura Darpan Prakashani, Agartala, March 1983, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> N De, *op.cit.*, p. 32

<sup>6</sup> Census Report 1310 T.E. (1901 A.D.), Tribal Research Institute, Government of Tripura, Agartala, Re-print 1995, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Annual Report on the General Administration of the Political Agency of Hill Tippera for the Year 1886, No-407, dated 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1887, para-34, Tripura Secretariat Archives, Bundle-51, Serial No-13 (un published).

<sup>8</sup> W. W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. VI, London, 1876, p. 505. (1973 Reprint).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Bani Prasanna Misra, *Socioeconomic Adjustments of Tribals: Case-Study of Tripura Jhumias*, People’s Publishing House, New Delhi, 1976, p.25.

<sup>11</sup> J. E. Webster, *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers, Noakhali*, Allahabad, 1911, p. 32-33.

<sup>12</sup> W.W. Hunter, *op.sit.*, p. 505.

<sup>13</sup> *Census Biharani 1340 T.E.*, *op.cit.*, Editorial Column.

<sup>14</sup> Annual Report on the General Administration of the Political Agency of Hill Tippera for the Year 1886, *op.cit.*, para – 29

<sup>15</sup> J . B. Ganguly, *Economic Problems Of The Jhumias Of Tripura*, Bookland Private Ltd. Calcutta, 1969, p. 64

<sup>16</sup> Census Report 1310 T.E. (1901 A.D.), Tribal Research Institute, Government of Tripura, Agartala, Re-print 1995, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p.22

<sup>18</sup> Tripur Chandra Sen, *Tripura In Transition (1923-1957)*, Agartala, Tripura, 1970, p.89.

<sup>19</sup> J B Ganguly, *An Economic History of North East India, 1826 to 1947*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2006, p.426.

<sup>20</sup> Bani Prasanna Misra, *op.cit.*, p.22.

<sup>21</sup> N De, *op.cit.* p 59

<sup>22</sup> N De, *op.cit.*, p. 56

<sup>23</sup> Pravas Ranjan Bhattacharjee, *Economic Transition in Tripura*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, p.48.

<sup>24</sup> Tripura District Gazetteers, *Government of Tripura, Agartala, 1975.* p. 137.

<sup>25</sup> Syama Prasad Mookerjee, *Leves from a diary.* Oxford University Pres. New Delhi, 1993, p.40.

<sup>26</sup> Tripur Chandra Sen, *Tripura In Transition (1923-1957), Agartala, Tripura, 1970.*, p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> *Tripura District Gazetteers, op.cit.*