ISSUES AND MANIFESTATIONS OF ETHNIC NATIONALISM IN TRIPURA

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Abstract: Tripura being one of the three smallest states of the Indian Union has been suffering from various manifestations of ethnic nationalism like ethnic riot, insurgency, separatism etc. This paper argues how the post-Partition politico-demographic reality, pauperisation of the tribals under the Post Colonial Indian regime and emergence of majoritarian politics led the outbreak of ethnic nationalism in Tripura and helped to design the agenda of its various manifestations.

Tripura, a tiny hilly state with picturesque natural beauty and rich biological diversity has been the traditional abode of two categories of population groups-the tribals and the non-tribals. The former is of Mongolian origin and consists of 19 tribes and the later is basically emigrants from adjacent districts of former East Pakistan (present Bangladesh). Tripura is surrounded by Bangladesh in three sides except a narrow boundary of only 53km with Assam and 109 km with the hilly ranges of Mizoram. It has a long international frontier of about 839 km in the West, South and North East with Bangladesh.

Historical Background behind Ethnic Politics in Tripura: It was a Princely State till it merged with the Union of India on 15th October, 1949. The kingdom was consolidated as a political unit by maintaining vibrant relations with the adjacent parts of Bengal. Rulers of the kingdom were sanskritised, economy and religion were largely influenced and demography of the kingdom got heterogeneous character. After the partition of the Sub-Continent, victims of communal riots from the then East Pakistan found their abode here in Tripura. From 1947 to 1971 the number recorded refugees in Tripura was 609,998 along with 'number of unrecorded illegal immigrants' resulted into demographic imbalance in Tripura. (Debbarma, 2005, P-143-144) Refugees were rehabilitated in Tripura under the initiative of the then political dispensation without considering the long term impacts of it. The local administration of post-merger Tripura was largely "Bengali dominated" (Bhaumik, 1996, P-77) and therefore the refugees rehabilitated in Tripura by granting them land, ration card etc. in the long run alienated the tribals from their own land and right over the forest resources. (Ghushal, 2017, P-34)

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Land and Forest Rights of the Tribals under the Post Colonial Regime: Post Colonial Indian State interfered in the existing feudal land and forest regime to pursue its agenda. There were mainly three categories of statist interventions: administrative, legal and developmental interventions.

A) *Administrative Intervention:* To assure rehabilitation of the refugees in Tripura the then Regent Maharani Kanchanprava Devi de-reserved an area of 300 square kilometer in 1948 from the "Tribal Reserve" created by Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya in 1931. It was the first administrative intervention of the State in the land and forest regime in the post colonial period. It provoked huge controversy and ultimately became an important issue in the future political discourse in Tripura.

B) *Legal Intervention:* The Indian Parliament enacted the Tripura Land Revenue and Reforms Act-1960 (TLR & RAct-1960) by replacing the feudal land tenure system of the previous monarchical dispensation with an aim to "abolish the intermediaries and to make the tillers the owners of the land". (Vohra, 2011, P-56) It also had a special provision (Section-187) to stop alienation of tribal land. (Debbarma, 2007, P-86) This law not only failed to check alienation of tribal land by the non-tribals but also it worked against the interest of the tribal people in the following ways:

i)   The Tripura Land Revenue and Land Reform Act, (TRL&LRA) 1960 was based on the Assam Act-1886 which recognized only individual land registered with the State. Since the new law did not recognize the community ownership of land, the hilly terrains of Tripura traditionally enjoyed communitarian ownership by the tribals became the property of the State. Therefore, the *jhum* cultivators used to cultivate those village commons for generations lost their control upon them.

ii)   The responsibility of administering the provisions of this Act was provided to the Land Reform Cell of the District Administration. And the District Administration was basically run by the non-tribal officials. So, whenever any such cases came before the Cell, the poor tribal people were victimized. (Vohra, 2011, P-56)

iii)   As it is mentioned earlier, the Act had a provision (Section-187) to restrict any transfer of land owned by the tribal people to the non-tribals. But it was silent about the penal provisions against the illegal encroachers of tribal land. So, it was just a remedy to stop further injustice against the tribals and not a remedial measure to undo the injustice already done against the poor tribals.

iv)   Most of the tribals being illiterate and not familiar with the formal law did not register their land. The law did not recognize their right over the commons. So the land that was their sustenance and habitat for centuries before the colonial land laws were enacted became state property under the colonial principle

of individual ownership. Most of them were not paid compensation for the land taken for it though they had traditional rights over it according to their customary law (Bhaumik 2006)

v)   Apathetic attitude of political leadership of the state was also reluctant to stop land alienation. The Section 187 of the Act instructed the Government to identify the lands occupied by the non-tribals through questionable means for restoration. It further instructed that such illegally restored lands were to be re-distributed among the needy tribal families. But this process was not in operation till 1980. The then Government of Tripura was so reckless that just before 11 days of the Assembly poll, an Ordinance called 'Tripura Land Revenue and Reforms (Second Amendment-1974)' was brought which was severely against the interests of the tribal people of the state. (Bose, 1996) Because this Amendment made the year 1969 as the cut-off year after which the takeover of tribal land by the non-tribals would be declared void. The 1960 Act provided for banning transfer of such land after 1961. By deferring the date from 1961 to 1969 the administration skillfully legalized all those illegal transactions up to 1969. So the political will of the leadership can be questioned easily.

C)   *Developmental Intervention:* Land right of the tribal people in Tripura also was violated by the government sponsored developmental projects like the Dumbur Hydro-electric project. The Dumbur power project was initially planned in 1960 as a medium range irrigation project. Subsequently it was converted into a huge hydro-electric project. After the completion of the dam in 1974, a large area covering 46.34 sq. km was submerged. Although according to the official records only 2558 tribal families were evicted from the area, yet the unofficial estimates claimed that the project ousted 8000 to 10000 families or about sixty to seventy thousand tribal people from the area. (Bhaumik, 2006)

In this way the administrative, legal and developmental interventions of the post colonial Indian State could not ameliorate the plight of the indigenous tribal people of Tripura. Rather they created scope of political activism for the leftists and the ethnic-nationalists.

Movements of the Tribal People: The common tribal subjects of Tripura Kingdom used to hold a reverential attitude towards the ruling dynasty. But the feudal rulers exploited them ruthlessly. Popular resentments aroused and manifested in the forms of revolts and rebellions like the Reang Uprising (1942-43) and created the legacy of violent political resistance in the native Tripura kingdom. (Bhaumik, 1996, P-68) But these revolts and uprisings had nothing to do with the society and economy of the common tribal communities. They were almost entirely dependent upon gathering of forest products and the traditional *jhum* cultivation. Their social life was full of ignorance and blind faith. In such a background a group of educated tribal youths rose with the aspiration for the community development through education and eradication of superstitions in 1945. They formed the *Janasiksha Samity* (JSS). The activism of this *Samity* is known as the JSS Movement (1945-1948).   It opened 488 primary schools in different parts of the

kingdom and motivated the educated tribal youths to render their service in those schools. As a result the leaders like Dasaratha Debbarma, Sudhanwa Debbarma, Hemanta Debbarma became popular within the tribal society. These leaders also had a secret link with the communist leader Biren Dutta and Aghore Debbarma. (Bhaumik, 1996, P-93) According to the advice of Biren Dutta the leaders of the *Janasiksha* Movement used the primary schools as a platform to spread cultural awareness among the tribals of Tripura. The activists of this movement developed a passionate love for their mother-tongue i.e. the *Kokborok* language and their own folk culture. Moreover, the movement stood against the money-lenders and non-tribal businessmen exploiting the poor *jhumias* ruthlessly. As a result the movement brought 'a touch of life in the slumbering tribal populace' and generated 'a sense of self-respect and nationalist consciousness' among them. (Deb, 1974, P-62) The JSS Movement is characterized as the rudiment of the Communist Movement in Tripura by some leftist intellectuals (Sengupta, 2006, P-125). But according to recent observations, the movement of the JSS was designed on "ethnic language against the Manikya State" (Debbarma, 2017, P-18) and its contemporary exploitative regime on the tribal subjects. So the movement of the JSS was not only an embryo of the Communist Movement in Tripura but also it is characterized as the "first ethno-nationalist outfit in Tripura". (Ghushal, 2017, P-31)

Leftist Tribal Politics in Tripura - a journey from militancy to parliamentary politics: Legacy of the *Janasiksha* Movement inspired a section of educated tribal youths to give birth an organization called Tripura *Rajya Mukti Parishad* in 1948 to emancipate the tribals from socio-economic and political bondage. It was inclined towards the communist ideology. In those days, the Communist Party of India adopted the line of armed struggle to defeat the successors of the "Anglo-American imperialism" as per the December, 1947 Resolution. (Basu, 1996, P-49) Following this line the *Rajya Mukti Parishad* adopted the strategy of violent resistance against the non-tribal money-lenders, *joetdars* and also the feudal administration. The *Mukti Parishad* opened its armed wing called "*Shanti Sena*" and recruited the battle-tested ex-soldiers of the First Tripura Rifles who fought the Japanese during the Second World War but presently jobless (Ghosh, 1984, P-72). Similarly a tribal women's force was also formed to act as an auxiliary of the guerilla unit. *Muktiparishad* under the aegis of the communist leadership established control upon the Khowai and the Sadar Sub-divisions. The government virtually lost its control over a vast area. A parallel administration of the *Muktiparishad* was started. The movement adopted a re-distributive agenda to end the suffering of the common tribal people by determining the terms of land relations, regulating the whimsical terms and conditions of the private money-lenders and non-tribal businessmen and *joetdars*. (Bhaumik, 1996, P-109; Mohanta, 2004, P-44) It also had its own political, social and cultural policies and programmes for the emancipation of the tribal people. The *Muktiparishad* took over the social stewardship of the *Tripuri* society from the Tripura *Kshatriya Mandal*. (Bhaumik, 1996, P-121) It ultimately became the most powerful actor among the tribal people of Tripura. The popularity of the communists in the hills of Tripura was due to the

revolutionary role of the *Muktiparishad* (1948-1951) in boosting the confidence of the tribal people by radical re-distributive agenda and also due to the stalwart leadership of the *MuktiParishad* leader Dasaratha Dev whom the common tribal people respected as "*Raja Dasaratha*" (Bhaumik, 2012, P-6), a genuine alternative of their King during the post-merger era. When the communists gave up the line of armed revolution and adopted the strategy of electoral politics and participated in the first general election in 1952, the benefit of popularity of the *Muktiparishad* was reflected in the ballot box. Both the Lok Sabha seats were captured by the communists. *Muktiparishad* leader Dasaratha Deb won from the Tripura East constituency by convincing margin. But with the changing demographic scenario, the tribals became minority and the communists lost their dominance in the electoral politics in Tripura.

With the introduction of electoral politics in the form of first past the post system in post independent India, the then ruling party, Congress started to be inclined towards the non-tribal refugees. (Bhaumik, 1996, P-121; Mohanta, 2004, P-93-94; Vohra, 2011, P-56) As a result the leftists could not do well in electoral politics till 1978. The revolutionary agenda of the *Muktiparishad* was interpreted/misinterpreted by the Congress as *Bangal Kheda* (Drive the Bengalis away) among the Bengali refugees who became majority in the mid 1950s and won most of the elections. In such a situation the leftists also had to adopt policies to influence the Bengalis. With this aim the veteran leftist Bengali leader Nripen Chakraborty formulated a strategy in the party-document entitled "*Party o Ganasanghathan Gadibar Kaje Agrasar Hao*" (in Bengali) which means "Build the Party and the Mass Fronts" to target three classes of refugee -1. Refugee cultivators, 2. Students and 3. The refugees who were employed under the government. (Chanda,1983) According to this strategy the leftists could build their organizations among the peasants, students and government employees and ultimately founded a very strong base among the non-tribals of Tripura. Even the leftist leaders like Biren Dutta, Dasaratha Deb and Nripen Chakraborty launched an agitation programme to resist the government to resettle the refugees outside Tripura in 1959. (Ghoshal, 2012, P-29) In this way the leftists in Tripura targeted both the major communities i.e. the tribals under the banner of the *Muktiparishad*, which initially adopted a radical line subsequently shifted towards the politics of demanding constitutional safeguard for the tribals and the Bangalis under the banner of the Mass Fronts. Main objective behind this was creating vote-banks and winning the battle of ballot. The leftists were successful. The organizational base of the left parties became strong in both the hilly areas under the banner of the GMP and in the plain areas under the banners of different Mass Fronts. In fact left politics in Tripura was not consolidated on the basis of its ideological strength i.e. by implementing the Marxian strategy of class struggle. It was the organizational base it could build among the refugees-turned-into-citizens made the leftists an indomitable force in the state politics in Tripura. (Chakraborty, 2014, P-20) Therefore, the leftist strategy of universalizing human suffering by taking part in refugee-rehabilitation movement immediately after the Partition of the Sub-Continent was as it were an ideological projection. But actually it served as an electioneering technique*. So the politics emanated from the quest for the "solidarity with human suffering

and vulnerability" and wanted to assure "land for the landless" during the GMP activism in the underground (Debbarma, 2017, P-19) adopted the "hazardous tightrope-walk"-strategy (Bhaumik, 1996, P-122) to accommodate the non-tribal refugees-turned-citizens into its fold and in the long run crystallized ethnic rivalry.(Chakraborty, 2014, P-20)

Outbreak of Ethnic Nationalism: In the last half of 1950 and early 1960s, tribal leaders like Snehakumar Chakma captured the attentions of those youths for 'exclusive tribal struggles'. (Bose, 1996, P-129) The platforms they launched were nothing but some sporadic reactions against the influx of non-tribal people and their rehabilitation in Tripura. So they could not successfully mobilize the tribals under their banner. Unlike them, the TUJS could successfully construct 'Tripuri Nationalism' and mobilised the tribal youths largely. The newly formed TUJS leadership maintained ethno-nationalistic line of struggle and challenged the communists in the tribal area. Their favourite slogan was: "*Kachak koofoor choong-chia, buinitala tanglia*" (in *Kokborok*) which means "Red and white we do not know; we shall not remain under anybody/party". In the context of the then political reality of Tripura, the standpoint of TUJS inspired the common tribal people to be united on ethnic line. And such an ethnic unity was channelized to undo all kinds of discriminatory perceptions in the civic and economic spheres of life. Neither the so called ethnically neutral Communists nor the pro-Bengali Congress could further the interests of the tribals. The basic demands of the TUJS were land, language and autonomy. The newly educated tribal youths found an uncompromising tune in this new political platform. Its demands were four fold (Ghosh, 1984, P-77):

1.   Creation of district council in the hill tribal areas under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

2.   Restoration of tribal land from the non-tribals which were illegally transferred.

3.   Recognition of *Kokborok* language.

4.   Adoption of Roman Script instead of Bengali for their language, i.e. the *Kokborok* language.

The TUJS could successfully construct '*Tripuri* Nationalism' and mobilised the tribal youths largely because of the factors like-

Firstly, TUJS could project an uncompromising ethnic line of political struggle which was not to be subsided in the game of number in the politics of first past the post system. For this purpose, the party adopted an anti-sanskritisation standpoint to undo the religious closeness promoted by the sanskritisation drives by the Manikya rulers. Growth of Christianity (59.29%) among the tribal population was spectacular during the period from 1971 to 1981. (Ghosh, 1993, P-228) The newly converted tribal youths rallied around the TUJS and its radical wings like "*Tripur Sena*" and TNV.

Secondly, emphasis upon the recognition and development of the *Kokborok* language was a unique drive by the TUJS. Although the JSS Movement and the GMP Movement took the initial efforts to popularize the *Kokborok* language, yet these movements did not accept the ethnic line and adopted Bengali script. The TUJS first demanded to introduce the Roman script and insisted to introduce the language in every spheres of life.

Thirdly, even in the use of traditional dress and ornaments of the tribal people an apathetic attitude generated among the youths due to the changes of demography and related socio-economic aspects. TUJS took initiatives to revive the traditional ones with modern design. They raised a popular slogan: "*Rignai Borok ma kanai*" which means "all have to wear *Rignai Borok*."

Fourthly, TUJS engineered an identity among the tribal people of Tripura centred on "*Borok*" means people in *Kokborok* language which included all the different sub-tribes of Tripura. Whoever was against the interest of "*Borok*" must be resisted through united struggle. The social stewardship of the tribal communities that was there with the *Muktiparishad* decayed rapidly. TUJS now started to boycott the market dominated by the Bengali businessmen, demanded constitutional safeguard and deportation of the emigrants who settled in Tripura after the merger of Tripura in 1949. Such an ethno-nationalist line helped the TUJS to penetrate into the educated tribal youths and to become the main opposition party in the state in 1978.

Phase of Ethnic Insurgency: A radical section of it formed the "*Tripur Sena*" which was renamed as Tripura National Volunteers (TNV). Ethnic insurgency was started from 1979 and continued. TNV surrendered in 1988 by signing a tripartite agreement with the Government of Tripura and the Union. But Tripura did not get rid of insurgency. A fraction of the TNV gave birth to the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) in 1989 and in the next year another organization called All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF) came into being. A faction of it surrendered in 1993 while another group continued their activities. In this way radical agenda of ethnic-nationalism led large scale insurgency in Tripura. The period in between 1993 to 2003, the Government lost its control from 70% of its territory and 31 out of 44 police stations were fully and another 5 were partially declared as 'Disturbed Areas' under the Armed Forces Special Power Act-1958. (Vohra, 2011, P-141) The main agenda of these insurgent outfits were to drive out the non-tribal people from Tripura (Bhaumik, 1996, P-228) and create space for the tribals in politics, public employment, business and socio-cultural avenues. Major insurgent groups in Tripura crafted their agenda by prioritizing the demand for sovereign "*Twipra* State", the ethnic homeland of the tribal people. For this purpose, the TNV formed an "Independent Government of Tripura" in the beginning of 1980s. In 1990s the ATTF and the NLFT also formed their own self-styled governments as the "Independent Tripura" and "Free Holy Land of Tripura" respectively. (Vohra, 2011, P-129) But such a secessionist standpoint of the insurgent groups was strategic rather than ideological. Strategically this kind of self-determination claims helped the militants

to get sympathy of the foreign nations like China and Bangladesh and also the other powerful insurgent groups like MNF, NSCN, ULFA etc. (Bhaumik, 1996, P-228) Design of exclusive ethnic homeland also helped the militant groups to recruit the fresh cadres and get the sympathy and shelter within the tribal localities.

However, the frequency of insurgency related incidents started to reduce from the beginning of the new millennium due to the fencing of the Indo-Bangla border and large scale surrender of the insurgents. But the claim for ethnic homeland remained. Now it has been promoted and designed by the indigenous political parties.

Shifting Identity from "Borok" to "Indigenous People" and the Quest for 'Twipraland':
Under the aegis of TUJS the centre of tribal identity in Tripura was "*Borok*"-a *Kokborok* word meaning human being in ordinary sense but constructed by the TUJS ideologues as the *Pancha Tripuras* i.e. the five main tribal communities Tripuri, Reangs, Jamatia, Noatia and Halam. But in 1990s the new concept of "indigenous people" became the centre of ethnic identity in Tripura. On 9th June, 1997 the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) - a new political party was launched to defend the rights and interests of tribal people from structural dispossession (Debbarma, 2016) by the merger of a number of tribal organisations like the Tripura Hills People's Party (THPP), the Tripura Tribal National Conference (TTNC), the Tripura Tribal Students' Federation (TTSF) and the *Tripura Upajati Karmachari Samity* (TUKS). Keeping tune with the marginalized groups across the contemporary world, political activists belonging to the ethnic tribals in Tripura seek to promote the concept of 'indigeneity' 'to rectify the past and present injustices' by seeking 'relevance and engagement in contemporary society'. (Karlsson, 2003, P-404) The IPFT and other 'Indigenous' political parties for this purpose follow a strategy of politicising the issues related with 'systematic marginalisation of indigenous communities' and 'also their claim to dispossession in Tripura'. (Debbarma, 2017, P-18) Perhaps it is the reason for which IPFT and other 'indigenous' political parties did not hesitate to work as an over-ground front of the insurgent groups like NLFT (Bhaumik, 2012, P-15) to have an edge in electoral politics against the mainstream political parties like CPI (M) in various elections like that of the Autonomous District Council election 2000 and snatched power from the then mighty left party.

Now in the changing scenario in the middle of the first decade of the new millennium with the losing trend of insurgency related violence, IPFT changed its strategy to air a new agenda of curbing out a new state within Tripura – *Twipraland* to attract the bulk of unemployed tribal youths within its fold for fighting 'marginalisation' and 'dispossession'. This new strategy helped the party to win the second position with 18.06% of votes in the ADC election held in 2015 and decimated its rivals in the hills and ultimately came

in a pre-poll alliance with the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) in 2018 Assembly election to de-throne the leftists from their hegemonic dominance in the electoral politics in Tripura.

Conclusion: The above account of historical evolution of ethnic nationalism in Tripura helps to develop a number of significant insights into the state politics of Tripura in particular and that of the North Eastern Region in general. Tripura is such a province under the Union of India which has witnessed the highest demographic transformation in modern world. From 1901 to 2001, the population of Tripura grew twenty times. (Subramanian, 2016, P-90) As a result the density of population increased and threatened the livelihood and autonomy of the common tribal people. But the post colonial Indian State could not address the plight of the 'son of the soil' tribal people who got rid of the feudal regime after the merger in 1949. The builders of the post colonial Indian State were also indifferent about the ethnic autonomy issue of the tribals of Tripura. The tribals of Tripura took arms much before the Nagas and unlike the later they did not fight for sovereignty but for the rights of the tribal people. In spite of all these, the makers of Indian Constitution did not recognize the claim for autonomy of the tribal people in the new constitution of India. The Bordoloi Committee that was formed in the Constituent Assembly to draft the provisions of the Sixth Schedule for the autonomy of the tribal people of Assam only did neither include the autonomy issues of the tribals of Tripura nor did it visit the state. After a long struggle of nearly forty years full of bitter experiences the Union Government granted the Sixth Schedule status for the tribals of Tripura. (Bhaumik and Bhattacharya 2005, P-227)

Secondly, the callous attitudes of the political dispensation in addressing the land issues through the legal and developmental interventions also proved the post colonial nature of the Indian State.

Thirdly, the majoritarian outlook adopted by all the mainstream political parties to have an electoral edge in the first past the post system of representation adopted by the Indian political system has been largely responsible for the decay of faith of the 'marginalised' tribal youths in the main stream politics. Ethnic nationalism and insurgency were the most viable options to choose.

Fourthly, the political class also failed to follow multicultural practices while delivering administration. In most of the cases political agenda of the hegemonic leftists prevented the Autonomous District Council and other constitutional bodies to perform their formal roles. As for example, the Left Front dominated Tripura state Tribal Welfare Department and the ADC administration were simultaneously working as per the political agenda of the Leftists and therefore the ADC Administration lost its financial autonomy and unable to deliver many of its legal duties including that of restoration of tribal land. (Mahato & Deb, 2017, P-833)

Fifthly, there has been an unhealthy nexus between the main stream political parties and the ethnic nationalists. The mainstream political parties used to oppose otherwise the main agenda of the ethnic

nationalists but for the benefits of electoral gains they often come in an understanding with these political parties. As a result political credibility of these parties is very low among the youths.

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