



Ethnicity and Tribal Struggles for Self-Determination in Tripura

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ABSTRACT

Tripura is a small State located in the Northeastern parts of India, bounded by Bangladesh on its north, south and west, while it share its border on the eastern side with the state of Assam and Mizoram. Autonomy struggles increasingly generate a fair amount of violence. In Tripura, self-determination movements have turned into armed struggles, triggering spirals of increased violence. Recently, the indigenous tribes for an aspiration to self-determination demanded for the right to establish a separate territorial state, or rather to obtain some form of autonomy within an existing state-structure.

Although, the formation of Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution of India is believed to have fulfilled the long cherished dream of the tribal's of Tripura who have for long clamored for self-determination (autonomy) for their socio-economic upliftment. But, TTAADC hardly has been successful to make any headway in finding solutions to any basic problems of the tribal's.

Key Words: *Reang, Ethnicity, Autonomy, Self-Determination, TTAADC.*

INTRODUCTION

Regionalism along social and ethnic lines has been a dominant development in the years since Independence. Ethnic self-consciousness and its consolidation and asserting along the lines of tribe, community or language groups have become increasingly manifest in the recent years in the entire Northeastern region. Ethnic clash, natural calamities, religious confrontation, armed conflict, poverty etc. form the core issue. This problem prevails in almost all the societies and states. As all of the affected people are civilians they continue to suffer both politically and economically with adverse effects on their society and culture. Emergence of tribal social formations, often with demand for specified territories as politico-administrative units are common features in Northeast India. The context of smooth integration of tribals and non-tribals, of various language groups and religious communities appear to be fraught with many hurdles. The commotions that go with demand-making polities, including secessionist movements, have in the meantime, created unsettled conditions. As identity identifies the individual characteristics in every society, there is a unique perception to be guided by the preposition to launch a new and better civilization. Therefore, identity influence the needs for survival in the society.

Identity Question in Tripura: Tripura with an area of 10,486 sq.km has always been a multi-ethnic state like most other Northeastern state of India. The total population of Tripura is 31,99,203 (2001 Census) i.e. 8.18% of the entire Northeastern states. There are 19 scheduled tribes in Tripura, namely the Tripura/Tripuri/Tippera, Riang/Reang (Bru), Jamatia, Noatia, Lushai, Uchoi, Mog, Kuki, Chakma, Khasi, Garo, Halam, Bhutia, Bhil, Munda, Orang, Lepchas, Santhal and Chaimal.

Based on cultural identity, the tribal aspirations for their right in the matter of political and economic sphere were always high. Tripura, an ancient kingdom ruled by 184 rulers merged with the Indian Union on 15th October 1949. The impact of India's partition and the communal riot that took place had a great impact on Tripura. It was exerted through the influx of refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) bordering Tripura. The influx continued even after 1971 (creation of Bangladesh), thereby out numbering the indigenous tribal population of the state. The demographic explosion ultimately reduced the tribals to minority position (50.9% in 1941, 36.85% in 1951, 31.53% in 1961, 28.95% in 1971, 28.45% in 1981, 30.95% in 1991 and 31.05% in 2001). This demographic change caused fear-psychosis in tribal mind which ultimately gave birth to the question of identity crisis. It was estimated that 6,09,998 refugees officially settled in Tripura between 1947-1971.

Tripura was a Union Territory until 1st July' 1963 and attained the status of a full-fledged state only on the 21st January' 1972. After India's Independence the problem of refugees from East Pakistan had a great impact in the history of Tripura. The unabated process of immigration completely changed the demographic structure of Tripura. In fact, flow of illegal migration has seriously affected all aspects of life of the indigenous people of Tripura. This trend has totally endangered the tribal's identity and their existence which reflect the core issue behind ethnic tension and social unrest in Tripura. Mass migration from Bangladesh has resulted in widespread inequality and imbalances of the land holding which ultimately resulted in the growth of insurgency and militancy such as the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV), the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF). Also, the growth of insurgency is based with an assertion of protecting cultural identity which may be on the verge of crisis due to subjugation of ones society by the neighbouring society. Thus, ethnic and social unrest is also centered on the issue of encroachment into their lands by the outsiders. The feeling of remaining backward combined with the fear-psychosis of being eliminated by other occupying their traditional habitats have led to endless clashes between communities. Based on cultural identity, the tribal aspirations for their right in the matter of political and economic sphere were always high. But the development in the tribal areas is always slow or uneven thereby giving rise to the growth of social unrest.

Autonomy struggles increasingly generate a fair amount of violence. In Tripura, self-determination movements have turned into armed struggles, triggering spirals of increased violence. Recently, the indigenous tribes for an aspiration



to self-determination demanded for the right to establish a separate territorial state, or rather to obtain some form of autonomy within an existing state-structure.

Tripura Tribal Struggle for Self-Determination

As the Northeastern part of India presents a unique history of different ethnic group's co-existence, the ethno-communal scenario may get communalized in due course of time. Identity conflicts have given shape to struggle for self-determination. The loss of language adversely affects tribal culture and threatened their extinction. Language is often considered a symbol of identifying a particular group's consciousness, and a language conflict invariable leads to ugly conflicts between different ethnic groups. A weaker language tends to be unconsciously destroyed or be bilingual which ultimately will get lost in due time. Moreover Northeastern Region is mainly composed of diversified culture with different tribes concerned about their own distinct identity and autonomy. Identity conflicts are the most violent form of all conflicts as they actively seeks to identify their rights in terms of socio-cultural, economic or political assertion. The Indian Constitution devotes various articles for the redressal of grievances and upliftment of the underprivileged particularly with reference to the Scheduled Tribes. For instance, the Bru/Reang demanded autonomy within Mizoram *i.e.*, setting up of an Autonomous District Council (ADC) based on the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, in Reang-dominated areas of Mizoram. In the constitution of India, the rights for the formation of Autonomous District Council (ADC) and Regional Council is permissible under the Sixth Schedule, Article 244(2) and 275(1) as is the case in the states of Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.

Self-determination movements have turned into armed struggles, triggering spirals of increased violence against the state. The discontent started erupting in various forms. *Sengrak* (cleanced fist) was one such secret and militant tribal political movement formed in 1947 with an aim to oppose the influx of non-tribal refugee from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The movement gained momentum in 1967 under the leadership of Ananta Reang and with the help of some Chakmas and the backing of Mizo National Front (MNF). The movement gathered momentum at Kanchanpur in North Tripura where the Reang and the Chakma tribes were in majority. R.K. Debbarman, a top-ranking officer of Tripura permitted a group of about one thousand Bengali refugees to settle at Kanchanpur. The Reangs and the Chakmas repeatedly requested their Member of Legislative Assembly Raj Prasad *Choudry* (Reang) to remove the refugees. As Raj Prasad *Choudry* (Reang) did nothing; Ananta Reang thus formed a secret militant tribal organization called *Sengrak*. This was soon outlawed but spawned the Pahari Union in 1951. Two other tribal bodies, the Adivasi Samiti under Chakma inspiration and the Tripuri Rajya Adivasi Sangh came in to being, and soon after, all three came together in 1954 to form the Adivasi Sansad.

Tribal youth organized themselves under the banner of the Communist Party of India to defend their rights over their ancestral land. However in the 1960s because of serious ideological differences, the tribal youths left the Communist Party and formed their own party, Upajati Yuba Samiti (Tribal Youth Party). Subsequently, Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl founded the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) in 1978. Dhananjoy Reang was its vice-President.

Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) continued its activities till the signing of a tripartite agreement on 12th August 1988, paving the way for the surrender of its cadres. Another outfit, All Tripura People's Liberation Organization (ATPLO) remained active in 1980-1983. The National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) was founded in March 1989 by certain disgruntled Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) cadres led by Dhananjoy Reang. The formation of NLFT is usurped against state terrorism and for greater autonomy (self-autonomy). The NLFT, with its different leadership ideology has undergone several splits. A factional group of NLFT returned to the normal life through tripartite accord of Memorandum of settlement on 15th April 2004. However, the NLFT's dominant faction led by Biswamohan Debbarma remains one of the two active outfits in Tripura. The other outfit in addition to the NLFT which has steadfastly refused to be drawn into any peace deal with the Government is the Ranjit Debbarma-led All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), founded in July' 1990. The ATTF had been demanding for deportation of all those refugees who have come to Tripura after 25th March 1971, restoration of alienated lands, introduction of inner-line permit, etc. The ATTF returned to the mainstream through execution of bi-partite MOS on 6th September 1993. Apart from the above, there are a good number of smaller groups like Tripura Resurrection Army (TRA) founded in 1994 by Dhananjoy Reang that surfaced between the decades from 1990 to 2000.

Even as insurgency raged in the state, new parties constructed around the identity politics came into being. Some of the major tribal organizations and pressure groups which serve as organizational vehicle for tribal consciousness are Tripura Jana Sikha Samiti (1945), Tripura Sangh (1946), Sengrak (1947), Tripura Ganamukti Parishad (1948), Paharia Union (1951), Adivasi Samiti (1952), Tripura Rajya Adivasi Sangh (1953), Adivasi Samsad (1954), East India Tribal Union (1956), Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (1967), Nikhil Tripura Upajati Yuba Samiti (1968), Tripura Tribal Student's Federation (1968), Tripura National Volunteers (1978), Tribal People's Liberation Organisation (1981), Tripura Hills Peoples Party (1983), Tripura Tribal Socio-Cultural Development Organisation (1989) and All Tripura Tribal Force (1991). In 1997, the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura was formed with the central agenda of turning the areas under the autonomous district council into a separate state.

The Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council (TTAADC)

The tribal leaders of the Northeast India after 1947 had demanded political autonomy and introduction of new administrative measures in order to enable the tribal people to run the administration of their respective tribal regions. They therefore, sought constitutional provisions to maintain the tribal customs, cultures, languages and to ensure their autonomy. The Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) was formed with the efforts from various sections of the tribes of Tripura to ensure socio-economic development of backward tribal communities.

Tripura, once a princely state was acceded to the Indian Union on 15th October 1949. The tribals who once formed the majority of the population till 1941 (50.09 %) but in 1950 (34.68 %) with the influx of refugees from Bangladesh were reduced to minority. The minority position also created fear-psychosis among the tribals which

resulted in the demands for the formation of Autonomous District Council. The formation of Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) generated high expectations among the indigenous tribes of Tripura but it failed to render better living conditions to majority of the tribal communities. The tribal communities of Tripura were given encouragement by the Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya in 1941 to settle down from the habit of their traditional *jhum* cultivation (Slash and Burn Method) and get accustomed to wet land (plough) cultivation. The Maharaja also issued an order in 1950 that the tribals will not be allowed to donate, sell or mortgage their land without permission. This order was issued so as to safeguard the interest of the tribals and their lands from being illegally transferred.

The Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) Bill in terms of the Fifth Schedule to the Constitution was passed in the Tripura Legislative Assembly on 23rd March 1979 when the Central Government led by Morarji Desai did not approved the original plan of introducing of an Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution. The Bill was assented by the President of India on 20th July 1979. The Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) under the Fifth Schedule came into being on 18th January 1982 with an opportunity to protect tribal rights to land, guaranteeing employment and ensuring the right against exploitation by non-tribal money-lenders.

The objective behind the formation TTAADC was to provide and empower the indigenous people with an internal autonomy. To promote and bring all- round socio-economic and to protect and preserve the tribal culture, customs and traditions.

By the 49th Constitutional Amendment in 1985, the TTAADC was brought under the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution. The formation of TTAADC under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution of India is believed to have fulfilled the long cherished dream of the tribal's of Tripura who have for long clamored for self-determination (autonomy) for their socio-economic upliftment. TTAADC is the only autonomous bodies in the entire Northeastern states where all the nineteen tribal communities of Tripura were accommodated in its administration. But, TTAADC hardly has been successful to make any headway in finding solutions to any basic problems of the tribals. There is no any unique method to implement any particular projects. It has to depend on the State Government for finances, project execution and its subsequent implementations. Also, the deficit in the allocation of funds hampers the TTAADC from taking up any developmental projects. The mass rural tribal's thus become victims of structural stagnation and economic immobility.

Conclusion

The identity of a person reflects his socio-culture, values, customs and language in various ways. But various government or majority ethnic groups in a particular area relentlessly adopted wrong policies towards the minorities. Therefore, many disheartened tribes are looking out or grouping for their identity, socio-cultural and political rights. And, thus inter and intra-tribal conflicts starts, when they find the rivals ethnic groups guilty of weaning their fundamental rights. The continuous deprivation and discrimination of the minority ethnic groups have now become



psychologically alienated. Moreover, the complexity of the tribal society needs a proper guidance in terms of rights that should be provided by the government. The legitimate right of any ethnic group's in Northeastern parts of India need to adhere to the constant constitutional safeguards due to the diverseness of their culture. The need for such genuine rights occur because most of the future course of action is determined by the majority rule, and thereby a regular deprivation take place on the minority in most parts of the Northeastern parts of India. Our constitution provides different rights for the permanent safeguards for all the protection of the minority ethnic groups in terms of dignity.

Ethnicity has emerged as one of the most significant social issues. It touches upon the political, cultural and social sphere; an assessment is required in order to solve the precise impact of the social unrest prevailing in different parts of North-East India. Awareness for a united struggle to safeguard tribal interests from the economic exploitation that resulted from the national development programme would build up an avenue that can enable tribal-people to sustain their right to self-determination. Central/State Government developmental works should be able to meaningfully integrate commitment to economic progress along with the protection of tribal rights. Peace may be a difficult proposition to realize in a multi-dimensional ethnic conflict, because appeasement of one can lead to incitement to violence by another. Therefore, we must initiate an agreement that is capable of defusing potential and future conflicts that might lead to further social unrest. Such social issues can be resolved by dialectical approach, which in turn creates a congenial atmosphere for dialogue that will accommodate other's views.

Therefore, an appraisal is essential to find out the problems relating to different ethnic identities and a root cause for their social unrest. It is with regards to the questions of development programmes and schemes in backward tribal areas such exploitation and ethnic tension tends to occur. So, more effective and proper Policy Planning by the concerned Central and State Governments is required for the elimination of such ethnic conflict and tension in order to achieve results for a permanent peace in Tripura in particular and the entire North East India in general.

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